Aria the Scarlet Ammo 1

Author: Chugaku Akamatsu
Illustrator: Kobuichi

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Aria the Scarlet Ammo

Written By

CHUUGAKU AKAMATSU

"Want me to open a hole in you?"
Kanzaki H Aria
A skilled S-rank Butei with mastery of twin pistols and combat with two katanas. She ignores the opinions of others and always tries to resolve matters by acting on her own authority.
Assault Division

Kinji Tohyama
A second year high school student traumatized by the special attribute he possesses. A former member of the Assault Division, he is currently an E-rank, the lowest rank at Butei High. He wants to transfer to another school as soon as possible.
Inquesta Division (Investigations)
"Butei High isn't your average high school."

Goki Muto
A good friend of Kinji's. His specialty is the ability to pilot anything that's considered a vehicle.
Logi Division
(Logistics)
Shirayuki Hotogi
Kinji's childhood friend. She comes from an ancient line of shrine maidens who serve at Hotogi Shrine. An exceptionally reliable person.
SSR Division
(Psychic Ability Investigation Research)

Reki
Snipe Division
A gifted S-rank sniper. No one knows her last name; apparently, not even she knows.
Riko Mine
Inquesta Division
The number one ditz of the Inquesta Division. Her ability to gather information, however, is extraordinary.

"Be my slave!"

"...this girl is absolutely unbelievable."

Aria: The Scarlet Ammo

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Lock and Loaded

Do you think girls come falling down out of the sky?

That's what happened in the movie I saw yesterday. Well, that sort of thing might make a great introduction for a movie or comic book—a prologue in which something mysterious and unusual occurs. The protagonist is your would-be hero of justice, setting forth on a big adventure.

"Man, I want a girl to come falling down out of the sky!"

It's actually a rather foolish thing to say. I mean, there's no way a girl like that is normal. Being drawn into a bizarre world and made to play the part of some hero of justice—in real life, such a turn of events is bound to be full of danger and more trouble than it's worth.

I don't know about everyone else, but that's why I, Kinji Tohyama, don't need any girls falling out of the sky. I want to lead a normal, peaceful life. So the first thing I'm going to do is transfer out of this school. This utterly absurd school…

Ding-dong.

I woke up to a single chime of the doorbell. *Not good*.

It would seem that I fell asleep wearing nothing but my trunks. Turning towards the cell phone at the head of my bed, I learned that it was seven in the morning.

Who in the world is ringing my doorbell at this time of the morning? Maybe I'll just pretend not to be here.

But there was something about that single chime that gave me a sense of foreboding. After sluggishly slipping on a dress shirt and putting on my school pants, I proceeded to make my way through this apartment, which was needlessly spacious for a single occupant, and looked outside via the spy hole. It was as I expected.

"…Ngh."

There stood Shirayuki. She was dressed in a pure white blouse with a dark red collar and a dark red skirt. In that spotless Butei High school uniform, Shirayuki held a lacquered compact mirror in one hand while she busily tidied up her bangs.

What is she doing here? Shirayuki proceeded to take a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

I can't ever figure her out, I thought to myself as I opened the door.

“Shirayuki.”

As I opened the door, Shirayuki hastily closed her mirror and hid it behind her back.

“Kin-chan!” said Shirayuki perking up and calling me by my nickname from childhood.

“Didn’t I tell you to stop calling me that?”

“Oops. S-sorry about that. Kin-chan, I was thinking about you just now, so when I saw you, I couldn’t help but—Oops, I called you Kin-chan again. Sorry, Kin-chan. Oops…”

Shirayuki’s complexion visibly paled, and she covered her mouth with her hand in a state of panic. Seeing her reaction, I lost the will to protest any further. The reason that Shirayuki calls me, Kin-chan stems from the fact that the two of us are childhood friends. As Shirayuki’s name suggested, she had snow-white skin, and the bangs of her glossy black hair were cut at a perfectly straight angle, just as they had always been since she was a child. She had kind and gentle eyes, with beautiful, long eyelashes. One could expect no less from a person who comes from a long line of shrine maidens of Hotogi Shrine. As always, she was an example of the ideal Japanese woman.

“More to the point, this *is* a men’s dormitory. You shouldn’t just come waltzing into a place like this.”

“U-um, up until yesterday, I was staying at Ise Shrine for training, so I wasn’t able to look after you.”

“I told you, you don’t need to.”

“B-but…” said Shirayuki starting to snivel.

“Okay, okay! It’s no big deal.” With no better solution, I decided to let Shirayuki, whose eyes had become moist with tears, into my apartment.

“T-thanks for letting me visit.” Shirayuki bowed at nearly a ninety-degree angle before crossing the threshold and slipping off her black shoes, which she placed neatly by the door.

“So? What did you want?” It was too much trouble to gather at the dining table, so I just sat down on the floor by the coffee table.

“I-I wanted to give you this.” Shirayuki lightly sat down in the proper Japanese fashion with her legs folded underneath her and untied a bundle wrapped in a cloth.

From the bundle, Shirayuki presented multi-layered lacquer boxes,

which she placed in front of me and removed the lid, also adorned with a gold lacquer design. Inside the boxes were soft and fluffy looking Japanese omelets, salted and sweetened boiled shrimp all perfectly lined up, silver salmon, and Saijou persimmons. And amongst all of these luxurious ingredients was a glistening helping of white rice.

"You…must have gone through a lot of trouble making this, didn't you?" I said as Shirayuki handed me a pair of lacquered chopsticks.

"N-no, I just woke up early is all. Besides, Kin-chan, I figured that during spring break, you were only eating pre-made meals from the convenience store again, so I was kind of worried…"

"That's nothing for *you* to be concerned about." The fact was I *had* eaten nothing but pre-made meals from the convenience store during spring break and gratefully accepted the delicious looking breakfast Shirayuki prepared.

I had to admit that Shirayuki's cooking, especially Japanese cuisine, was absolutely exquisite. Shirayuki, still sitting in the same manner, had a hint of cherry blossom-color on her cheeks, and started to peel the skin off of a tangerine. Seeing as how she carefully removed all the pith from the fruit and placed it on a white plate, it was apparent that the tangerine was meant for me.

I suppose I should thank her at least.

With my stomach now full and a tangerine in my mouth, I turned towards Shirayuki.

"Um…thanks for always helping me out like this." "Hm? Oh, thank you too, Kin-chan…thank you very much."

"Why are *you* saying thanks? More importantly, don't bow at me with your fingers on the ground. It looks like you're kneeling down before me or something."

"T-that's because you were kind enough to eat the food I made, and then you thanked me so graciously…" said Shirayuki in a thin voice and lifted her face, gleaming with happiness and eyes glistening.

Look here, why are always so timid? You should stand tall, stick out your chest, and be confident in yourself. After all, you do have an amazingly large chest. As I was thinking this, just by chance, (it really was just by chance) I happened to catch a glimpse of Shirayuki's chest. With the upper part of her body leaned forward in a bow, Shirayuki's blouse was hanging loose around her breasts. Shirayuki's impressively deep cleavage was clearly visible, as well as the black lacy bra enveloping it.

B-black?! Are you serious?

Flustered, I turned my eyes away from the scandalous garment unbefitting a high school student. Even so…

I could feel that dangerous sensation. It was like a surge of blood at the very core of my body. *Don't go there. I'm abstaining from that sort of thing.*

"Thanks for the meal." I jumped to my feet as if I were trying to run

away from Shirayuki.

Phew. Looks like it's gonna be okay.

Shirayuki cleared the table with the utmost efficiency and proceeded to bring me my Butei High school uniform, which had been spread out on the sofa.

"Kin-chan, as of today we're starting our second year of school, aren't we? Here's your bulletproof uniform."

After I put on the jacket, Shirayuki brought me the pistol that was sitting by the television.

"Today's just the opening ceremony. I don't need to bring my gun, do I?

"Of course you do, Kin-chan. It's school regulation," said Shirayuki immediately getting on her knees and attaching a holster to my belt in which she placed the pistol.

School regulations…

"*All Butei High students are required to carry their pistol or sword with them while on school grounds*."

Yeah. Definitely not normal. The abnormality of Butei High is enough to make me sick to my stomach.

"Besides," Shirayuki continued, "there's always the possibility another 'Butei killing' could happen…" Still standing on her knees, Shirayuki cast an apprehensive upward glance at Kinji.

"Butei killing?" "You know, the serial murders that we were notified about by e-mail at the beginning of the year?

Oh, that's right. There was an incident like that, wasn't there? If I recall, a bomb was planted in the car or some other vehicle of a Butei, forcing the victims to keep driving. They had a radio-controlled helicopter armed with a machine gun following them around. In the end, they wind up plunging into the ocean. I'm pretty sure that's how it happened.

"But they arrested the perpetrator, didn't they?" I asked.

"B-but a copycat crime could always take place. And I divined your future this morning. It said you would have trouble with women. If anything were to happen to you, I… I…" said Shirayuki who began to snivel again.

Trouble with women, huh? You could say it was right on the money. I've had to deal with this person right at the start of my morning. She's starting to tear up again. If I lose points on my student evaluation again for violating school regulations, my goal of transferring to a normal school is going to be that much harder to achieve. I guess I'll do what she wants and arm myself at least.

"All right, all right. Look. You can be rest assured now, right? Come on, stop crying." I let out a sigh and took a knife—a butterfly knife that was a memento from my older brother—off the shelf, which I then placed in my pocket.

For some reason or other Shirayuki was gazing at me with an

enchanted look in her eyes and placed her hands on her cheeks.

"…Kin-chan, you're so dashing. You really can tell that you're from a family that's been a 'hero of justice' for generations."

"Please, stop. I'm not a kid," I said disdainfully. All the while, Shirayuki, in high spirits, took out a black nametag and affixed it to the chest pocket of my jacket.

"Kinji Tohyama," it read.

There was a rule at Butei High, which stated that all students must wear nametags during the first month of the semester. I intended to disregard that rule, but it would seem Shirayuki predicted as much and prepared a nametag for me. Just what you'd expect from a dependable superwoman who was the student body president, as well as the president of the horticulture club and handicraft club. Not to mention, she's the captain of the girls volleyball team, and has a student deviation value of seventy-five. For a loafer like me, that made associating with Shirayuki rather difficult.

"I'm gonna check my e-mail before I head out. You go on ahead," I said.

"Oh, then while you're doing that, I'll take care of the laundry and the dishes and–" "Don't worry about it."

"O-okay. In that case…um…I'd appreciate it if you would text me later," Shirayuki said hesitantly with a slight bow. When she got to the door, Shirayuki made another deep bow and left the apartment, just as she was told.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

What a hassle. She finally left.

I sank heavily into the chair in front of my computer and idly checked my e-mail and various web sites. As I idled away my time, before I knew it, the clock was approaching seven fifty-five.

Ah, crap. I wasted a bit too much time. I'm not gonna make the seven fifty-eight bus.

The rest of my life. That's about how long I would regret missing the seven fifty-eight bus that day. The reason being because before long, a girl was going to come falling out of the sky—a girl by the name of Aria H. Kanzaki.

First Bullet La Bambina dal'ARIA

Was it Arthur Rimbaud who said, "When it rains, go out and enjoy the rain"? If a guy was going to go to such great lengths to insist that he hadn't lost, it almost seemed like positive thinking. Having missed the opportunity to ride the bus, I who might have used Rimbaud as an example, decided to go to school by bicycle as I gazed at the route lying before me.

Making my way past the neighborhood convenience store and video rental shop, I passed under the monorail station leading to Odaiba. Beyond that point, countless tall buildings could be seen on the other side of the bay. Tokyo Butei High School was located on a rectangular Mega-Float that lies to the south of Rainbow Bridge and was roughly two kilometers from north to south and five hundred meters from west to east. This Mega-Float, nicknamed "Academy Island," was the site for a general educational institution whose purpose was the cultivation of Butei.

Butei were people who served as a countermeasure against violent crimes under a newly established and internationally acknowledged qualification. Those who were in possession of a Butei license were permitted to carry firearms and were given the power of arrest, and they could operate within the jurisdictions of the police force. However, the difference between the police and the Butei was that the Butei were driven by money. As long as someone was footing the bill, a Butei would take on any job regardless of how dangerous or trivial it may be, provided it was in accordance with Butei regulations. In other words, they were a jack-of-all-trades. At Tokyo Butei High School, in addition to general academic subjects, students could take specialized courses related to Butei activities just as the school's name implied. There were a variety of specialized courses to choose from. The building I just passed on my right, for example, was specifically for the Inquesta department and all related classes. It was the division I transferred to during the third semester of my first year here, and the students learned about traditional deduction methodology and all kinds of techniques used in detective work. I guess you could say it was the most normal department this school had. Up ahead was the Connect department (communications), and beyond that was the Repier department

(forensics). These were all fairly peaceful places to study, but if you continued ahead a little farther, you'd arrive at the department I was affiliated with up until the end of my second semester last year, the notorious Assault department.

I changed directions and made my way towards the gym.

Great. Looks like I'm going to make it in time for the opening ceremony.

This school was certainly out of the ordinary, but it still wouldn't be a good idea to be late to the opening ceremony of the first semester.

"A bomb has been freaking planted on this bicycle."

I heard a strange voice utter the kind of line one reads in an anonymous blackmail note with the letters clipped out of fliers and pasted together. "If you freaking get off the bicycle or freaking reduce your speed, it will freaking explode."

Oh, I know what this is. It's an artificially made voice like the one used by that popular Vocaloid on the Internet.

It wasn't until after having made such an analysis that I remembered a certain detail in the statement just made.

…A bomb…? What's this all about? Who's the idiot behind this? Is it some sort of joke?

Furrowing my eyebrows, I looked around me, and was surprised to discover that I had been unaware of a strange object speeding along beside my bicycle. It was an awkward vehicle with only two tires side by side and resembled a scarecrow on wheels. I had seen such a vehicle on television a long time ago. It was called a "Segway".

"Do not attempt to call for help. The bomb will freaking explode if you use your cell phone."

There was no one driving the Segway, however. In place of a person who should have been riding the machine was a speaker—that and a single mechanical barbette.

"…!"

Attached to the barbette was the muzzle of a gun pointed directly at me. An Uzi—a submachine gun manufactured by Israel IMI Co., capable of firing ten rounds of nine millimeter Parabellum ammunition per second.

"Wh-what the hell?! What kind of prank is this?!" I yelled out towards the Segway but there was no response. It simply raced along beside me with the muzzle pointed in my direction.

What the hell is this?! What's going on all of a sudden?!

In a state of confusion, I searched the bike with my hands and found that there was something strange attached underneath the saddle. I traced it with my fingers, as I repeatedly told myself to calm down.

This is bad.

I wasn't able to identify the type, but it seemed to be Composition C-4. And it was of considerable size. It was large enough to completely obliterate a car without leaving a trace of it behind, let alone a bicycle.

Are…you…kidding me?!

A chill ran down my spine, and I broke out into a cold sweat.

They got me. I can tell. This is no prank. I fell right into their trap. My bike's been taken over. This is unbelievable. My bike has been hijacked!

Damn it! Damn it! Why me? Why did it come to this?

Preparing myself for the worst-case scenario, I raced around looking for a place void of any people and wound up heading for playing field number two. Peering through the wire-mesh fence, I noticed that playing field number two was empty, just as it always was in the morning. Left with no other choice, I pedaled my bike towards the entrance. The Segway continued to follow with its gun aimed right at me. This tactic the criminal was using….It was a copycat crime of the Butei killings Shirayuki had mentioned.

That's not important, right now. What am I going to do?! That's the issue!

I had been desperately racking my brain for a plan on the way here, but was unable to come up with any ideas.

Come on, Kinji! Are you…going to die? In a place like this?

At that moment, I noticed something that made me cock my head. In this already highly unlikely situation, I saw something yet even more unlikely. It was a seven story apartment complex located nearby the playing field—if I recall, it was the girls' dormitory—and on the edge of the roof stood a girl. She was dressed in Butei High's sailor uniform and had two pink pigtails long enough to be seen clearly from even this distance.

When she jumped down from the building, it looked as if she was

leaping over the moon, still vaguely visible in the morning sky.

Jumped down from the building?!

For an instant, my foot almost slipped off the pedal, but I frantically regained my balance and continued pumping my legs. With her pigtails like rabbit ears streaming in the wind, the girl seemed to be dancing in midair. She must have been preparing to glide across the skies while atop that roof, because next, I heard and saw a paraglider open up above me. As I continued to pedal with eyes open wide, astounded at the scene playing out before me, I realized that this girl with her pigtails streaming in the wind was actually headed right for me!

"Y-you idiot! Don't come this way! This bike is rigged with a bomb–" The warnings I yelled out were too late. She had been plummeting at a rate faster than I anticipated. Swerving her body as if she were on the swings of some playground, she suddenly turned at a right angle, and with her left and right hand, drew two large pistols, one silver and one black, from the hostlers she was wearing around each respective hip.

"Hey, you idiot over there! Hurry up and duck your head down!" she yelled out.

Blam! Blam! Blam! Blam!

Before I had time to lower my head, the girl unsympathetically fired at the Segway. The average optimum firing range for a pistol is said to be seven meters. But this girl was over twice the distance from her target. Not only that, but she was hanging from an unstable paraglider, and to top it off, she was firing with her arms fully extended outwards and the pistols tilted at a ninety degree angle. But in spite of all these disadvantages, the bullets she fired hit their mark as if they were being magically led to their target. The Segway wasn't given the opportunity to fire back even a single shot and fell to the ground, its barbette and wheels falling off as it broke into pieces.

Amazing. Her shooting skills are phenomenal. I didn't know we had a girl like that in our school.

Spinning the pistols in her hands, she returned them to their holsters and continued to flutter through the air. With the back of her skirt swaying back and forth like a pendulum, she flew over my head with a grim expression on her face—and with good reason. It was still too early to be feeling relieved. The back of her skirt wasn't what I needed to be concentrating on. After all, it was *my* rear end that had an explosive attached to it, which could be used to demolish a building! I entered playing field number two in an attempt to distance myself from her.

"I-I told you to stay away from me! There are explosives planted on this bike! It'll explode if I slow down! Y-you're gonna get involved in the blast!"

"You imbecile!" The girl positioned herself directly above me and stomped on my head as hard as she could with her white sneakers. "Don't you remember article one of the Butei Charter?! 'Believe in your

comrades and help one another.' Get ready!"

The girl rode a current of air and ascended gently into the sky. Marveling at the magnificent display of paragliding skills, I forgot my anger towards being kicked in the head and watched her in awe.

She has such great reflexes. But she should at least wear some leggings. Not that I was able to see anything since her rise in elevation was so instantaneous.

Now that I think about it, what did she mean by "Get ready"? Is she planning on helping me? How?

The girl started another descent towards the playing field and made a sharp U-turn in my direction. She then proceeded to flip herself upside down, sticking her feet into the handles of the brake cords she was operating with her hands just moments ago, and came flying straight towards me at full speed. Conveniently enough, I was also pedaling right in her direction.

Are you serious…?! I went pale as I realized what she was intending to do. It would seem that she also figured out that I realized what her plan was because the next thing she said was, "Come on, you idiot! Pedal with everything you've got!" She yelled out this order to me with both of her arms stretch out to the sides, making her resemble an upside-down cross. *You're the idiot! Who in their right mind would attempt a rescue like this? But there isn't any other way… I guess I have no choice!*

Giving up on thinking of any other plan, I desperately started to pedal. I forced myself to simply pedal as hard as I could. And so, this girl and I sped towards one another, the distance between us rapidly closing. I recalled seeing a similar scene in the animated movie I watched yesterday. Only in that scene the roles played by the guy and the girl were reversed. Just as I made that observation, I found myself embracing this upside-down girl and being sent soaring through the sky. It was difficult to breathe due to my face being smothered by her stomach, and from it, I could smell a sweet-and-sour fragrance reminiscent of gardenia buds…

BOOM!!

There was a flash of light and a roaring sound followed by a blast. The bicycle I abandoned had been completely and utterly destroyed.

That bomb was the real deal! With the blast of hot air blowing against us, we were freed from the paraglider, which got caught on the branch of a cherry tree, and sent tumbling through the door of a storehouse for gym equipment located in a corner of the playing field. There was a loud crash, and I don't know what we collided into, but for an instant, I lost consciousness.

……

……

"Ngh. Ow."

What happened?

As far as I could tell, I had landed on my rear end and was inside some sort of small box-like object.

Where am I? I'm pretty sure I came crashing into the gym storehouse…oh, I know. I'm inside a vaulting horse.

Apparently, I knocked off the upper section on impact and fell inside the lower half. But for some reason, I don't seem to be able to move. The fact that the inside of this vaulting horse is so narrow is certainly a factor, but aside from that, there's something on top of me giving off a sweet-and-sour scent.

What is this? It's so warm and soft.

My sides were sandwiched between something comfortably elastic, and something was leaning against my shoulders. There was also something rather cushiony resting atop my forehead.

"Hm?"

Pushing aside that cushiony mass with my forehead and cheeks, I suddenly became filled with astonishment to learn what it was that I had been trying to remove from on top of me.

Cute…

I almost said the words out loud in spite of myself. What I was referring to was the face of the girl—the courageous girl who had just jumped off the roof of the girls' dormitory, battled with the Segway while hanging from a paraglider, and swept me into the air, saving my life.

"…!"

That's when I realized that the things squeezing my sides were actually her thighs and what was leaning against my shoulders were her arms. I have no clue what could have happen to get us tangled up in this fashion, but I was currently stuck inside a vaulting horse carrying this girl in my arms.

No way. This is unreal. I have a girl way too close to me. A surge of seething blood began to well up at the core of my body.

Oh, no. I'm gonna… I'm supposed to be abstaining from this sort of thing.

"H-hey." I tried calling out to her but there was no reply. She looked like she was sleeping, as she lay there unconscious. She had long eyelashes protruding from her eyes lids, and her pink lips, which expelled sweet-and-sour smelling breath, were as small as cherry blossom petals. Her long hair, done in twin pigtails, glistened with a glossy sheen in the light that seeped through the narrow windows.

Pink hair. That's rare. Is this what you'd call a strawberry-blonde?

My life was about to come to an end, so I hadn't noticed earlier, but she was cute. Very cute. She was like one of those unrealistically lovely girls you're prone to see in fantasy movies. However . . . the type of "cute" I'm describing is similar to the impression you get from children or a doll. In fact, now that I got a good look at her up close, she really did resemble a little kid herself. Judging from her build, I'd say she was

a middle school student. Then again, she might be an elementary school student who came here on the intern system that recently started. This little girl is the one who just staged that dramatic rescue operation? Amazing. Absolutely amazing. Having said that…

"Ngh."

This girl was straddling me above the stomach and putting quite a bit of pressure on my abdomen. It was rather difficult to breathe. That being the case, I struggled to somehow change the position in which we happened to be. In doing so, my nose felt a ticklish sensation when it brushed up against her nametag. Since today was the opening ceremony, her grade and the class she's assigned to hasn't been filled out yet, but I could see her name. Aria H. Kanzaki.

"…?"

But why is her nametag in such a high position? Puzzled by this, I lowered my gaze.

"…Ngh!"

The blouse of this girl named Aria was lifted up all the way to her neck! It would seem as if her clothing became disheveled when we came rolling in here. As a result, her white bra, elaborately dotted with hearts, diamonds, spades—all the marks you'd find in a set of cards—was plain to see. I came to another realization when I noticed the inscription on a weird tag sticking out from the hem of the bra. The inscription read, "65A(B." It was a push up plunge bra. A so-called "Wonderbra" as it were. If you're wondering how I knew this, it's because my late older brother was knowledgeable on the subject; it's definitely not because I research the matter of my own accord. Apparently, this "Aria" was trying to make her A-cup out to be a B-cup. I did sympathize with her, but I'd have to say it was a failed attempt. I call it a failure because what the push and plunge bra had to work with was just too measly, and there was no pushing or plunging for it to do. Having said that, this was the silver lining of an otherwise ominous cloud for me. If these breasts were larger and pressed up against my face, we would have had a big problem. I would have been forced to change against my will for breaking the taboo. I would have entered "that mode."

"Y-… Y-…," stammered the girl.

"…?"

"You pervert!!!"

What I heard was a childish voice with a slightly nasal tone. You could describe it as the kind of voice you might hear in an anime. This voice alone would bring fans to their knees saying something along the lines of, "A voice like that coupled with that face and that figure? This is just too good to be true!"

"You-, y-y-y-you're the worst!" Aria, who had apparently woken up, was glaring at me as she quickly pulled down her blouse. What followed was a flurry of hammer punches to my head, delivered by her bent arms

and not all that powerful.

"H-hey! C-cut it out!"

"You molester! Ingrate! Scum!" Aria continued to unleash punches upon the top of my head. Evidently, she thinks I'm the one who lifted up her blouse.

"I-it's not like that! I-I didn't–" I was trying to justify myself as I was being showered by her fists when all of a sudden–

Bratatatatat!!

A thundering sound filled the air around the storehouse.

What the-?!

Several times, I could feel the impact of something violently colliding with the vaulting horse near my back. It was just like being under fire!

"Ugh! There's more of 'em!" Aria peeked outside of the vaulting horse with those crimson eyes of hers and pulled two pistols out from underneath her skirt.

"More of what?!"

"Those weird two-wheelers! They're toys being used for Butei killing!"

Butei killing? Weird two-wheelers? …Is she talking about that Segway?! That means when I felt those shocks, it wasn't just like being under fire. We actually were under fire!

Luckily for us, at Butei High, firearms are used during P.E. as well, so the vaulting horses are also bulletproof. But what are we supposed to do, cornered in a box like this? I have no clue, and I can't do anything about this situation. Not the way I am now.

"What is the matter with you?! Fight back! You're a Butei High student, aren't you?!"

"I can't! What do you expect me to do?!"

"We're outgunned! There's seven of them!"

Seven? We have seven submachine guns aimed at us?! It was at that moment when something completely unexpected happened. In order to shoot at the Segways, Aria unconsciously leaned forward . . . and planted her breasts firmly in my face in the process.

Blam, blam! Blam, blam, blam!

Aria, returning fire from the gaps of the vault horse, was too busy concentrating on taking out her targets and didn't seem to realize that her chest was pressed against my face.

Ahh. Here we go. It's all over now. "Why," you ask? Because they were there. It didn't look like they were there. In fact, they practically weren't, to tell the truth. But there were the breasts of a girl. Despite being this small, they were still soft and bulging out like they should be. At this moment, I had two unbelievably soft, cute dumpling-like objects shoved in my face.

I never knew. A girl's breasts are this soft even when they're so small. I always figured they wouldn't be so soft unless they were bigger and

more rounded, but it looks like I was wrong. The reason I was able to make such a calm observation, given the dire situation we were in, is because I knew I already broke the rule that I had set out for myself. Sitting there taken in by Aria's breasts, I could feel "that sensation." That indescribable sensation like the core of my body heating up, hardening, and growing to the point of bursting. Lub-dub. Lub-dub.

My blood, hot enough to burn me from the inside, began to converge at the center of my body.

It's going to happen.

I can't stop it.

There it goes.

I've entered . . . hysteria mode!

Blam! Blam! Blam! Click.

Aria's pistols signaled that they were out of bullets, and she stooped down to switch magazines.

"Did you finish them off?"

"I just made them fall back out my range. They're hiding behind the row of trees . . . but I'm sure they'll be back soon enough.

"You're a strong little one, aren't you? That alone is quite a feat."

"…huh?" Aria knit her brows at hearing my tone of my voice, which had suddenly become that of a cool guy.

Ah, man. I'm about to do it again, aren't I?

My last bit of hesitation vanished in the next instant. I slipped my hands underneath Aria's slender legs and tiny back, which easily fit in my arms, and swept her off her feet as I stood up.

"Aah!" Aria yelped in surprise.

"For your reward, I'll give you the princess treatment just for a little while."

Having suddenly been swept up in my arms like a princess by her knight in shining armor, Aria opened her mouth wide, exposing a pointy little feline-like tooth as her face flushed. With Aria in my arms, I placed my foot on the rim of the vaulting horse and leapt to the edge of the storehouse in a single bound. Once there, I gently sat Aria down on a pile of mats like a cherished doll.

"W-w-w-what are…?!" Aria looked at me with blinking eyes in response to the display of agile movements which I didn't seem capable of seconds ago.

"Sit right there and relax, my princess. It'll be enough for me to be the one doing the gun-slinging."

What am I…? It looks like there's no stopping me now.

"W-what's gotten into you?! Did you lose it?!" Aria's flustered anime character voice was immediately followed by a rally of gunshots.

Bratatatatat!!

Once again, the Uzis riddled the gym storehouse with bullets. But the walls were bullet proof and this was a dead angle. It was essentially just

a waste of ammunition on their part. Smiling wryly, I walked towards the door, where their line of fire was concentrated.

"L-look out! You're gonna get shot!"

"A much better alternative than you being the one getting shot."

"W-w-what's with the change of character all of a sudden?! What do you think you're going to do?!

I turned my head halfway around and winked at Aria, whose cheeks were bright red, and was in a state of confusion.

"I'm going to protect you."

Pulling out my matte silver Beretta M92F, I walked out the door, exposing myself to the Uzis. The seven Segways lined up on the field all fired on me simultaneously. And every one of their bullets missed their mark. Of course, they did. After all, I could see them. In my current state, I could see every single one of those bullets as if they were travelling in slow motion.

Good aim. Each one of them has its sights pointed right at my head.

I bent the upper half of my body a fair ways back diagonally, dodging the barrage. In that same position, I made a sweeping motion with my arm from left to right and fired my gun in full automatic. I knew where each bullet was headed without even having to look. The number of shots I fired was seven. I already knew that each bullet would find its way into the muzzle of an Uzi.

Blam, blam, blam, blam, blam, blam, blam!

Every single Segway had its Uzi blown right off the barbette. And all it took was seven bullets. It was almost too easy. After confirming that the pile of fallen Segways were no longer operational, I made my way back into the gym storehouse. For some reason, Aria was once again inside the vaulting horse. She had the upper part of her body sticking out and an expression on her face that seemed to say, "What in the world just happened?" The second our eyes met, she scowled at me and retreated into the vaulting horse like a mole from the Whack-a-Mole game.

Uh…

I'm not sure why, but she appeared to be quite angry.

"D-don't expect me to be thankful. I could have taken out those toys all by myself. I'm serious. I really mean it." While putting up a bold front, Aria seemed to be wriggling around inside that vaulting horse.

She was trying to tidy up her clothing. Naturally, she was going to have a hard time, however. I noticed when I lifted her up earlier, but the hook on her skirt was broken. It must have happened after the explosion.

"A-and don't think this makes up for what you just did to me! That was an indecent assault! A distinct criminal offence!" Aria glared at me with her crimson eyes through the hole of the vaulting horse.

"…Aria, that's an unfortunate misunderstanding," I said, slipping off

the belt around my pants and tossing it inside the vaulting horse. "Please understand. That was completely out of my control."

"O-out of your control?!" Aria jumped out of the vaulting horse gripping her skirt, which was held up by my belt.

Landing on her feet with a lightness that attested her small figure, she stood in front of me. She…was *standing*, right? She was so short that I doubted it for a second. Even if you took into consideration the horn-like hair ornaments holding her twin pigtails in place, she couldn't have been more than one hundred and forty-five centimeters.

"Y-you…undeniably…" Aria was glaring daggers at me with that bright red face of hers. She then clenched her fists and must have been expending every effort to get the words out because when she was able to open her trembling rose-pink lips, she stamped her feet at the same time.

"W-when I was unconscious, y-you were trying to t-t-t-take off my clothes!

If it's that embarrassing to say, then just don't say it.

"N-n-not only that, but you were staring at my b-b-b-b…" *There she goes stamping her feet again. Does she have some sort of grudge against the floor?*

"You were staring at my breasts! That's a fact! I caught you in the act of assaulting me!" Aria grew so red I thought steam was going to come shooting out of her ears, which were also red.

"What exactly were you planning on doing?! Y-y-you'd better take responsibility!" Her stamping became even more erratic.

This is certainly a fine way of stomping on one's feet. And what does she mean by "take responsibility"?

"Okay Aria, let's calm down. Listen to me. I'm a high school student. A second-year high school student at that. There's no way I'm going to undress a middle school student. There's too much of an age difference. So you don't have anything to worry about."

I explained it as clearly and kindly as possible, but Aria opened her mouth wide and raised both of her fists into the air. I assumed that the reason no sounds were coming out of that mouth is because she was at a loss for words. But then tears welled up in her eyes as she glowered at me.

"I'm not a middle schooler!!"

Crack!

The floor upon which she was stamping finally gave way and scattered wood chips around her feet.

This isn't good.

My attempts to convince her of my innocence end in failure. It looks like I only succeeded in making her more furious by mistaking her age. Women are creatures with a tendency to become angry when they are thought to be older than they actually are. And this girl in particular

was rather violent. At this rate, there's going to be a large hole in the floor of this storehouse. It would probably be best to follow up with something to calm her down.

"…Sorry about that. So you're an elementary school student who came here on an internship, right? To be honest, I figured that was the case ever since you helped me out back there. But you really are something, you know that? You're such a–"

I was about to say, "brave little girl" when Aria abruptly hung her head downward. The upper half of her face was covered in shadows and I was unable to discern what expression she might have been wearing. She then swiftly placed her left and right hand on each respective thigh.

Now, what is she up to? Busy girl, isn't she?

"You are so… You are so… I never should have saved you!!"

Blam, Blam!

"Whoa!" I paled at two bullets, which buried themselves in the floor inches away from my feet. This girl shot at me! With both pistols!

"I'M…A…SECOND-YEAR…HIGH SCHOOOL STUDENT!!"

Out of the fire and into the frying pan—yet again.

"W-wait a sec!" I jumped at Aria, who had brought her pistols even closer to me, and pinned her thin arms underneath mine, forcing her weapons behind me.

Blam, blam, blam! Clink, clink!

Aria reflexively pulled the trigger, and the sound of bullets lodging themselves in the floor resonated. That sound was all I needed to hear. I could tell both pistols had run out of ammunition. It's a good thing I'm in hysteria mode. If it were just the plain old me, I'd be writhing on the floor, riddled with bullets right about now. For a short while, Aria and I were locked together in that position.

"Ngh! Yaaaaaaah!" Aria yelled.

I was surprised to find my body had turned itself around, only to realize that Aria performed a maneuver similar to what's known as a spring hip throw in Judo, and sent me flying, despite the large difference in our size.

"Whoa!"

This girl can fight empty-handed as well? She's damn good at it too.

Barely managing to perform a break fall, I used the momentum to roll myself out of the gym storehouse.

"You can't get away from me! I've never once let a fleeing criminal escape! …Huh? Wha-? Huh?" screamed Aria as she fumbled with the inside of her skirt using both of her hands.

Most likely, she was looking for the magazines with which to reload her empty pistols.

"Sorry about this." I lifted up the spare magazine that I took out from underneath her skirt when she threw me and flung it over a distance too far for her to be able to recover any time soon.

“Ah!” she cried.

Aria watched as the magazine fell into some far off bushes and shook her now useless pistols up and down in frustration. Her movements seemed to be saying, “Now you’ve done it!”

“You’re in for it now! I won’t forgive you even if you get on your knees crying and apologize to me!”

Aria returned her pistols to their holsters and thrust her hands underneath the back of her blouse. And from within that blouse she pulled out not just one, but two katanas! Firearms, hand-to-hand combat, and now katanas?! I was dumbfounded. But that didn’t stop Aria from pouncing at me with the leg strength I would have thought humans were incapable of. Those katanas, not as long as traditional Japanese swords, were zeroing in on my shoulders like two shooting stars. I managed to roll backwards and narrowly avoided losing my arms.

“You molester! Give up and– Uwaaaah!” Aria, who had charged at me, let out a cry like a new breed of wildcat. She then fell over backwards as if some invisible person had grabbed her from behind and performed a back suplex. Spread around her feet were bullets I had taken out of her magazine. I scattered them on the ground when her attention was on the magazine I threw.

“W-why you– Uwaaaah!”

When Aria tried to get up, she stepped on another bullet and fell back with such force that her legs practically went straight up into the air. It was like something you’d see in a comic book. While she was still on the ground, I decided to take the opportunity to get out of there as fast as I could. Aria has fighting abilities far greater than those of an average person. But at this moment, anger and shame were causing her to lose composure. I, on the other hand, was in “hysteria mode.” I would have been able to escape even if there were a hundred FBI agents targeting me. That’s what I was thinking to myself as I left Aria behind, paying no attention to her outbursts.

“You coward! I’m gonna open a giant hole in you!”

Such was the first encounter between me, Kinji Tohyama, and the demon Butei feared by criminals worldwide as “Aria the Scarlet Ammo”, Aria H. Kanzaki—filled with the smell of gun powder and a complete disaster.

Second Bullet Aria H. Kanzaki

I did it again…

After the opening ceremony, which in the end I was never able to attend, I depressingly made my way to the educational affairs department to report the incident that took place and treaded wearily along to my new classroom.

Histeria savant syndrome.

I just called it “hysteria mode”, but when the amount of intra-cerebral beta endorphins secreted during times of romance exceeded a certain level, about thirty times the normal amount of neural transmitters were used as a medium to drastically accelerate the activity of the cerebrum, cerebellum, spinal cord—the central nervous system of people with this trait. As a result, when a person entered hysteria mode, one’s ability to perform logical thinking, make good judgments, and even fast reflexes increased dramatically, and then this and that happens and…Well, to put it simply, when people with this trait were sexually aroused, they temporarily entered a super mode, transforming them into a completely different person. I was back to normal now, but I was pretty depressed about having entered hysteria mode in front of a girl, namely Aria. Normally, this condition was something that needed to be kept a secret from others—especially from females. Females were very frightening creatures…

In order to leave behind offspring, males instinctively became more powerful to a greater or lesser extent when protecting a female. Hysteria mode was an extreme example of exactly that. Whether it was because of those male instincts or not, I wasn’t sure, but when I went into hysteria mode, the drawback was the bizarre mentality I adopted towards females. First off, I would get the urge to protect a girl at any cost. If I came across a girl in a bind, I’d want to use my prowess as a means of having the girl desire me as I fought for her. The second problem was what I really couldn’t stand. I’d start to act and speak in an overbearingly flamboyant manner in front of that girl. This was also tied to the basis of hysteria mode, which was the instinct to “leave behind offspring”. The intent was to act like a guy that a girl would find charming, but…in hysteria mode, I’d treat females with kindness, flatter them, console them, and casually touch them. I became such a horrible

gigolo that just thinking about it afterwards made me want to die. But it was the girls that were really scary.

If I recall, the worst was back when I was in middle school. The middle school affiliated with Kanagawa Butei High. Some of the girls who learned about my condition found out that they could take advantage of me. They would perform all sorts of mischief to force me into hysteria mode and work me like a dog. Some would use me as tool of vengeance for being bullied. Others would have me punish a teacher for sexual harassment. In other words, I was made to be their self-righteous "hero of justice". Then you've got a girl like Shirayuki, which was a problem in itself…

And so, I left my hometown and came here to Tokyo Butei High School to take the entrance exam. That morning, renown as I am for my bad luck, Shirayuki just happened to come crashing into me in the hallway and fell down in the process of running away from some ill-mannered guys who were giving her a hard time. It was the kind of incident that would come straight out of a comic book. In any case, I wound up going into hysteria mode here as well. So I beat the hell out of the punks who were chasing Shirayuki and ended up whispering sweet words to her and gently consoling her until she stopped crying and calmed down. Ever since then, her naturally oppressive nature seemed to go into overdrive. But the thing is I wanted to go through life with as little contact with women as possible…

Magazines and DVDs of "that" nature didn't really pose a problem. I wasn't interested in that sort of thing anyway, and more importantly, all I had to do was keep myself from looking at them. It didn't work that way with real life girls, though. They had bombs hidden within their blouses as well as underneath their skirts and they were walking around all over the place.

Damn it, I sure inherited one hell of a problematic disorder.

Curse this troublesome, annoying, and extremely embarrassing ability —this wretched, detestable ability that caused the downfall of my older brother.

"Teacher, I want to sit next to him."

At the very first homeroom for the second year students assigned to class A, I nearly fainted when misfortune befell on me. That girl with the pink twin pigtails was also assigned to class A, and suddenly pointed at me while making that statement. A brief silence fell over the class, and then the eyes of every student homed in on me all at once.

"Ooooooh!" they all cheered.

Me? I fell right off my chair. All I could do was sit there speechless.

"Hee hee," laughed the teacher. "Well then, let's start off by having the cute little girl, who transferred to our school in the third semester of last year, introduce herself."

Our teacher's briefing gave me a very bad feeling. The short little girl

who sat up from a desk outside of my field of vision and stepped onto the podium was indeed Aria H. Kanzaki. With hysteria mode having already worn off and me back to my normal self, I couldn't think of what action to take and sat there trembling, half afraid that I might get shot at right there in class.

"I want to sit next to him," Aria said abruptly.

"W-what for?!" I whispered to myself with a voice that finally became functional. It couldn't be because she wanted to use me as a "hero of justice". I'm pretty sure she hadn't figured out about my hysteria mode. Did she take a liking to me? Doubtful. After all, not too long ago, she was enraged and had her weapons pointed at me to the very end. Does this mean she plans to sit next to me and slowly but surely end my life?

"This is great, huh, Kinji?! I'm not sure what's going on but it looks like spring has come your way! Teacher, I'll switch seats with her!" The large guy sitting to my right shook my hand up and down like a secretary to a candidate and left his seat smiling from ear to ear. This guy with spiky hair and a height of nearly one hundred and ninety centimeters was Goki Muto. He was an accomplished student in the Logi division who often took us to the site when I used to be in the Assault division. From scooter to rockets, he had the ability to pilot anything that could be called a vehicle.

"Oh, my. High school girls these days are quite assertive, aren't they? Very well, Muto. Trade seats with her." After looking at Aria and I in turn with a happy expression on her face, the teacher quickly gave her consent to Muto, who knew nothing of the circumstances between us. It finally got to the point where the rest of the class started sending their applause.

You've got it all wrong! I don't know anything about her. What's more, she's the violent girl who was shooting her gun at me just a while ago! Take it back! Take it back, I say!

Just as I was about to make such a protest to the teacher, Aria spoke up.

"Kinji, here's your belt." Out of the blue, she called me by my first name and tossed me the belt that I lent her in the gym storehouse.

Now that I took a good look at her, it became apparent that she acquired another uniform because both the top and bottom half were brand new. As I caught my belt, another member of the class spoke up.

"I get it! I know exactly what this is! He triggered a flag!" exclaimed Riko Mine, standing up from her seat to the left of Kinji. "Kii-kun isn't wearing his belt! It was in the possession of Miss Pigtails! This is quite the mystery! But I've figured it out!"

Riko, who was almost as short as Aria, was the number one ditz of the Inquesta division. Her Butei High school uniform, which she diabolically modified into a mess of frills, was evidence of that. I believe

they called that fashion “Sweet Lolita”. “Kii-kun” by the way, was the eccentric nickname by which this eccentric person called me.

“Kii-kun did ‘something’ that required him to take off his belt in front of this girl! Then he absentmindedly left his belt in her room! In other words…these two are in the midst of a hot and passionate romance!” Mine, with her naturally curly hair done in dog ears and flailing wildly, asserted her idiotic deduction.

Romance? Are you serious?

But then again, this is Butei High—a stomping ground for idiots. The entire class immediately filled with excitement.

“W-when did Kinji start dating a cute girl like that?!”

“I always thought he didn’t have much charisma!”

“He’s been secretly doing that sort of thing?! The guy doesn’t seem interested in other people in general, let alone girls!”

“How indecent!”

Aside from the general courses attended by groups of students assigned to specific classes, the students of Butei High also participated in specialized courses, which were akin to club activities so that students weren’t divided by class or year. This was why most students here were familiar with each other. Still, these guys were getting along way too well considering it was the start of the new semester. At times like this…

“Y-you guys better…” I clutched my head in my hands and turned my face down towards my desk.

Blam, Blam!

The sound of two gunshots resonating in succession instantly brought a dead silence to the class. Aria, red as a tomato, had drawn her two pistols and fired them without hesitation.

“R-romance?! Don’t be stupid!” Aria exclaimed.

A hole had been made in the left and right wall where each of Aria arms, spread like wings, were pointed.

Clink, clink, clink.

The empty cartridges that were ejected from the guns fell to the floor making the silence all the more noticeable. Idiot Riko, little by little, slunk back into her chair with her body twisted in a position as if she had been in the middle of some avant-garde dance. The rule at Butei High was students were not to fire their weapons “any more than necessary” when outside the firing range. In other words, it was allowed. Shoot-outs were a daily occurrence for Butei, which was what the students here were trying to become, so it was necessary to make them as desensitized to gunfire as any other soldier by exposing it to them regularly. That was the rationale, but…this girl must have been the first person to ever suddenly open fire during her self-introduction at the start of the new semester.

“All of you keep this mind! If anyone says anything stupid like

that…”

It was the first thing Aria H. Kanzaki said to the students of Butei High. “I’m gonna open a hole in you!”

The instant it became time for our lunch break, I was plagued with questions from the other students, but managed to come up with an excuse to take my leave from those idiots and took refuge on the roof of the science building. I couldn’t answer any questions regarding Aria to begin with. I met her for the first time this morning, she saved me after my bike was hijacked, and then she chased after me with her weapons in hand. That’s as far as our relationship went. I didn’t know her personally. As I let out a sigh in a fit of depression, a few girls came up to the rooftop chatting. I recognized their voices. They were girls from my class—girls from the Assault division at that. I crept into the shadows like a wanted criminal.

“You know that e-mail notification that was sent out by the educational affairs department? The one about a second-year male student’s bicycle being blown up. Don’t you think it was referring to Kinji?”

“Ah, I was thinking the same thing. After all, he didn’t show up at the opening ceremony.

“Geez. Kinji sure is unlucky today. First, he has his bike blown up, and then there’s Aria.”

The three girls, sitting side by side next to the chain-link fence, seemed to be talking about me. With a rather sour look on my face, I decided to just hide quietly for the meantime.

“I felt kind of sorry for Kinji back in class.”

“I know what you mean. Aria was going around asking questions about him before the day could even start.”

“Ah, she asked me too. She wanted to know what kind of Butei he was and if he had any past achievements. I didn’t really give it much thought though. I just said, ‘He was pretty amazing when he used to be in the Assault division.’”

“I just saw Aria in front of the educational affairs department. I’ll bet she’s looking through his file right now.”

“Sheesh. She must be seriously head over heels for the guy.”

Being the center of their conversation, I just couldn’t help but listen in on them.

“*Before the day could even start”? That means she started stalking me right after the hijacking incident.*

“Poor Kinji. He already hates girls, and then of all the girls in this school, Aria sets her sights on him. I don't care if she was raised in Europe or anything like that; she seriously needs to take a hint.”

“But you know, Aria does seem to be a bit popular with the guys.”

“That’s right. I heard she got her own fan club right after transferring here during third semester. Apparently, the pictures that the guys from the photography club secretly took of her during gym are being sold at a

premium."

"I know about that. I'm told the Polaroid pictures of her taken during figure skating and cheerleading class go for hundreds of dollars. The same thing goes for her rhythmic gymnastics pictures."

What kind of classes are those? Is this really a legitimate school?

"But the thing is she doesn't have any friends, does she? She skips school a lot too."

"And she's always eating lunch by herself. She sits in the corner of the classroom, all alone."

"Psh! How creepy!"

Listening to their obnoxious chatter, my gloom only deepened further. Having no interest in others, I wasn't even previously aware of Aria's existence, but she apparently had a personality that brought attention to her even here at Butei High, which was full of couples.

There was a specific time frame during which students were allowed to transfer out of Butei High School and into a regular school. Under Butei Law, students were required to register all their firearms and swords with the public safety commission, which is why students weren't permitted to withdraw from school until April, when the time came to renew their registration. Furthermore, students who wished to transfer out of Butei High had to submit an application one year or at least six months in advance. I already had my application form filled out. I planned to turn it in shortly and leave the world of the Butei come next April. My only regret is having to leave my apartment. It's a real nice place.

Evening.

Finally free of those idiots in my class, I slumped deeply into the sofa at my apartment and from the window, gazed at Tokyo's sky, aglow with the setting sun. I've been living alone in this dormitory apartment since January of this year. Originally, these apartments were made to accommodate four people, but when I switched divisions, just by chance, there were no other males from Inquesta to share a room with, so I don't have any roommates. Lucky me. It was a great feeling to be able to live as I pleased and in peace in this space where I wouldn't be bothered by all the dumb couples of Butei High. Nothing beats solitude.

Ah, it sure is quiet…

This morning's bike-jacking seemed like a dream. Regarding that incident, Repier collected the remains of the Segways, and Inquesta started an investigation. It might seem like I'm beating a dead horse, but the sad truth was that in the daily life of students at Butei High something as trivial as attempted murder wasn't given too much attention. Due to having gotten too used to gunfights while in Assault and being pestered about Aria all day, not even I, the victim, was giving it much thought. *Still…I wonder what that was all about. It was pretty malicious for a prank. Looks like our "Butei killing" copycat criminal is a*

bomber.

Bombers were one of the vilest types of criminals existing in this world, and they usually showed no discretion when choosing their targets. Generally, they gathered people's attention by indiscriminately causing an explosion and then forced their demands on the society.

Ding-dong.

Does that mean that bomb just happened to be planted on my bicycle due to bad luck?

Ding-dong, ding-dong.

Or was I personally being targeted? But for what? Nobody had any reason hold a grudge against me.

Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong.

Oh, shut up!

Someone had been repeatedly ringing my doorbell for some time now. I was going to pretend that I wasn't here, but it didn't look like it was going to work.

What's going on here? I had a hell of a day today, and I'm dead tired. At least, leave me in peace after school is over.

"Who is it…?" I asked in a dreary, less-than-polite tone as I grudgingly opened the door.

"That took you forever! When I ring the doorbell, answer the door within five seconds!" came a stern voice.

In front of me was a girl with her hands on her hips and narrowed eyes the color of a reddish purple camellia.

"K-Kanzaki?!"

There was Aria H. Kanzaki, standing before me in her school uniform. I rubbed my eyes like a character in a comic book would, but when I opened them, Aria was still there.

Why is she here?!

"You can just call me Aria." Before Aria even finished her sentence, she hopped over the threshold on one foot, taking off her shoes and dropping them by the door. She then started to trit-trot her way into my apartment.

"H-hey!" I made a grab for Aria in an attempt to stop her, but thanks to her child-like stature, she easily ducked out of the way. All I had gained from my efforts was the feel of her smooth pigtails as they grazed my fingertips.

"Wait a second! Don't just come barging in here!"

"Bring my suitcase inside! Say, where's the bathroom?"

Aria paid me no heed and went snooping around all over the place. Finding the bathroom rather quickly, she scurried inside and closed the door behind her.

…Not good.

This was Butei High. And the term "Butei" originates from "armed detective". In other words, I had been tailed.

“And what does she mean by ‘suitcase’…?”

Still not sure just what was happening, I looked behind me to find a suitcase on wheels—which I could presume Aria brought with her—sitting outside the door. It was fairly stylish with a striped pattern and a logo that unmistakably indicated it to be a name-brand suitcase.

This can’t be happening.

If any of the other students see a girl’s suitcase sitting outside my door, there’s no telling what they’re going to say. I mentioned it to Shirayuki this morning as well, but this is a men’s dormitory.

“Do you live here by yourself?” Aria came out of the bathroom and washed her hands. She paid no attention to me as I dragged her abnormally heavy suitcase through the door, wondering what she could have possibly packed into it, and continued looking around the apartment. Then she invaded the living room and went to the farthest corner where the window was located.

“Oh, never mind.”

Never mind “what”?

Bathed in the glow of the setting sun, Aria spun around and faced me, her twin pigtails following her lead in an elegant curve.

“Kinji, be my slave!”

…

……

……*Unbelievable. This girl is absolutely unbelievable. One moment she saves me, the next moment she shoots her pistols and waves her swords at me. She sits next to me in class, comes barging into my home, and now it’s “be my slave”?*

“What are you just standing there for? At least have the sense to hurry up and bring me something to drink! How rude can you be?!”

Aria dropped that small butt of hers onto the sofa I had been sitting on previously, causing her skirt to flutter high into the air. When she crossed her legs, I caught a short glimpse of her thighs as well as one of the two pistols she kept attached to them.

She stays armed even after school? This girl’s dangerous.

“I want coffee! Espresso lungo doppio! Use cane sugar! Have it ready in one minute!”

You’re the rude one here. And what kind of coffee is that? Sounds like an incantation of some sort of magic spell.

I had a strong gut feeling that getting her to leave would prove to be a most frightening task, so I just abandoned the idea and made her a cup of instant coffee.

“?” With a look of surprise on her face, Aria brought her nose to the cup, which she was holding on both sides, and sniffed at it intently.

“Is this really coffee?”

Apparently, she didn’t know what instant coffee was.

“That’s all I’ve got, so be thankful and drink it.”

She took another sip.

"It tastes weird. It kind of reminds me of Greek coffee… Hmm, maybe not."

"The taste isn't the issue here. More importantly," Sitting in a chair on the opposite side of the table, I took a sip of my own coffee as I pointed my finger at the trespasser. "I'm grateful to you for saving me this morning. And…I apologize for saying things that upset you. But that's no reason to barge in here like this. What's the big deal?" I asked with pursed lips.

Holding onto her cup, Aria remained perfectly still as she shifted her red eyes and looked into mine.

"You don't know?"

"Of course, I don't know."

"I thought you, of all people, would have figured it out a long time ago. Hmm…but I guess it'll dawn on you sooner or later. Oh, never mind."

I do mind.

"I'm hungry." Aria suddenly changed the subject as she threw herself on top of the arm of the sofa. Seeing her girlish gesture put a slightly red hue on my cheeks, and I averted my eyes.

"Do you have anything to eat?"

"No, I don't."

"You gotta have something. What do you usually eat?

"I always get my meals from the convenience store downstairs."

"Convenience store? Ahh, that miniature supermarket. Okay then, let's go."

"What do you mean, 'Okay then, let's go'? What for?"

"You're so dumb. We're going to get something to eat. It's already dinner time."

This isn't good. We're not on the same page here. Wait a second. Is she planning on staying for dinner too? I want her to hurry and go home.

As I placed my hand on my forehead because of a resulting headache, Aria jumped away from the couch in a way that made it seem like she had springs attached to her body. She then marched her way over to me and brought her face so close to mine that she was looking up at me from directly underneath my chin.

Whoa, back up. "Do they sell Matsumoto Peach Buns there? That's what I feel like eating right now."

There were three things a Butei had to watch out for: darkness, poison, and women. Aria, falling squarely into the third category, bought seven whole peach buns at the convenience store. Peach buns were just plain-old bean paste buns shaped like peaches, which was slightly popular a little while back, and she practically bought every last remaining one. I didn't think she was actually going to eat all of them right then and there, but then she betrayed my expectations and looked

like she was going to do just that. Sitting at the table, Aria was already devouring the fifth one. *Where in the world is she putting those peach buns inside that small body of hers?*

I was eating my usual hamburger patty bento and sending the bothersome intruder a gaze with my eyes that tried to convey the message, "Hurry up and leave." But Aria wasn't paying attention to my glare and the message they were sending her. Instead, she proceeded to start on her sixth peach bun and place her hand on her cheek as she blissfully savored her meal. *Were those things really that tasty?*

"By the way, what exactly did you mean by that 'be my slave' remark?"

"Join my party in the Assault division. We're going to conduct Butei operations together."

"What are you talking about? I left Assault because I hated it and transferred to Inquesta, the most normal division there is here at Butei High. Not to mention I intend on transferring out of this school and into a regular one. I'm not going to be a Butei. That in mind, you want me to go back to that insane division? Impossible."

"There are three phrases that I hate."

"Are you listening to me?"

"*That's impossible. I'm too tired. I don't feel like it*. These are three deplorable phrases that people use to stifle their own unlimited potential. Make sure you never use those words in front of me again. Understood?"

Having said that, Aria gobbled down the seventh peach bun and licked the bean paste off her fingers.

"As for your position, let's see…you should be in front with me."

"Front" refers to front man. It's the vanguard position when Butei form a party—a dangerous position with the highest probability of getting injured.

"No I shouldn't. Why me, anyway?"

"Why does the sun rise? Why does the moon shine?"

Again, the conversation goes awry.

"You're just like a kid who does nothing but ask questions. If you're a Butei, gather information yourself and make your own deductions."

I don't wanna hear that from someone who looks like a kid herself.

I almost said it out loud, but then I remembered that I was nearly killed this morning for making a similar remark, so I swallowed my words. In any event, there's one thing I understood. Any attempt to engage in a discussion with her would be useless. If I were to make an analogy between our conversation and a game of catch, Aria would be a pitching machine one-sidedly throwing her demands directly at me until I turned black and blue. In order for me to compete with her, my only option is to be completely frank in making my own demands known. Having come to this conclusion, I switch to a slightly more overbearing

tone.

"In any case, get going already. I want to be alone. Go home."

"I will…eventually."

"And when will that be?"

"When you agree to join my party in Assault."

"You do realize it's already night time?"

"I'm going to do whatever it takes to get you to join. Time's not on my side. If you refuse…"

"You bet I'm gonna refuse. What are you gonna do about it? Try your worst."

I took a firm position as I denied her, and Aria glared at me with those large eyes of hers.

"If you refuse, I'm going to stay here at your place."

Say what?! My cheeks were twitching so spasmodically I looked like I was about to go into a seizure.

"W-wait a second! What on earth are you talking about?! There's no way you're staying here! Go home!" I was so shocked that I had to swallow down the hamburger, which nearly made its way back up my throat.

"Stop your whining! If I say I'm staying here, then I'm staying here! I already prepared for a drawn-out battle!" shouted Aria with a voice that sounded like she was about to go on a frenzy and pointed to her suitcase near the door while scowling at me.

That suitcase is filled with all her personal belongings, she's planning to stay! Why is she going this far? What's her objective? What could she have to gain from bringing someone like me back to Assault?

"Get out!"

I'm not the one who just said that. Aria took the initiative and screamed the words that I should have been the one to say.

"W-why do I have to be the one to leave?! This is my place!"

"Stubborn people like you need to be punished! Go out and cool your head! Don't come back for a while!" yelled Aria, swinging her fists in the air and displaying that cat-like tooth.

I'm not really sure what just took place, but I was driven out of my own home. I went to the convenience store and looked through a comic strip magazine with a scowl on my face, but then I figured I couldn't just stand there reading without purchasing anything, so I bought the issue before heading back home. It was, indeed, my home. Yet I softly opened the door and stepped inside as if I were a burglar.

Oh? I don't sense Aria's presence.

I looked around the living room and the kitchen, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Thank heavens. God hasn't forsaken me, after all. I'm not sure what happened, but it looks like she left.

I breathed a sigh of relief and headed for the lavatory to wash my

hands, seeing as how I just came back from being outside.

That's when I hear a splash of water coming from the bathroom. Upon investigating, I noticed through the opaque glass door that the light was on in the bathroom. I could slightly make out the small silhouette of a person with their legs sticking out of the bathtub, humming a song. *So that's it. She was taking a bath*.

…What?!

…Taking a bath?!

I took a step backwards.

I get it. She got rid of me because she wanted to take a bath.

Nervously looking downwards, I saw Aria's uniform placed in a plastic laundry basket. In her skirt, which had been turned inside out, were the holsters she kept concealed there and the pistols were sticking out of them.

Additionally, two short Japanese swords were jutting out from under her white blouse, which was also turned inside out. I hear the sound of the silhouette, or rather, Aria I should say, getting out of the bathtub and thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest.

Impossible. This can't be happening.

Already in a state of panic, I was further distressed by another sound.

Ding-dong.

It was the horrible chime of the doorbell.

T-This way of ringing the doorbell…Shirayuki?!

"Whoaaaa?!" As I ran out into the hallway, I stumbled over my own feet and slammed into the wall.

"Ki-kin-chan, what happened? Are you all right?" came Shirayuki's voice from behind the door.

Uh-oh. She heard that noise just now. I can't pretend I'm not here anymore.

"Y-yeah, I'm fine."

Assuming an air of composure, I opened the door. Shirayuki was dressed in her shrine maiden garb consisting of a crimson hakama and white kosode. She was also carrying some sort of bundle in her hands.

"W-What are you dressed like that for?" I asked abruptly, with my eyes periodically darting back towards the bathroom.

"Oh, this? You see, I was running late because of class, but I wanted to make you dinner and deliver it to you as soon as possible, so I came here without changing first… I-If it bothers you, I can go get changed and come back."

"No, that's all right."

I stopped Shirayuki right where she was because from the looks of her, she really would get changed and come back. The class she was talking about was probably SSR. SSR was short for Supernatural

Searching Research, an extremely suspicious specialized course to study those with psychic abilities. I didn't know the details of the course, nor did I want to know, but apparently this shrine maiden was a model student in that area as well. But now wasn't the time to be worrying about that. Currently, a supernatural phenomenon was taking place in my home.

"Say, Kin-chan. You know that e-mail notification that was sent out this morning about the bicycle-bombing incident? Were you…the person involved in that by any chance?"

"Y-yeah. That was me." I mumbled the words very quickly, but when Shirayuki heard this she literally jumped up ten inches into the air.

"A-Are you okay?! Were you hurt?! Let me treat your wounds!"

"I'm fine. Don't touch me."

"O-Okay…. But I'm glad you're safe. Nevertheless, the culprit is unforgivable for targeting you like that. I'm going to rip whoever did this to shreds and bury the person in concr…I mean, arrest him!" I had a feeling I heard an odd word surface in the declaration she just made, but I must have been hearing things. Yeah, I'll leave it at that.

"Don't worry about it. Shootouts are an everyday occurrence here, aren't they? This conversation is over."

"O-Okay. Um…sure." Shirayuki looked as if she still had more to say, but nodded her head.

I wish a certain twin-pigtailed girl would take an example from Shirayuki and be a bit more compliant.

"…But…um…it feels like there's something…different about you tonight, Kin-chan."

"D-Different? In what way?"

"You seem to be a bit more distant than usual…"

Uh-oh. Why is this girl so perceptive?

"I-It's just your imagination! More importantly, tell me why you're here! What did you come for?"

What I really need to be doing is getting rid of her ASAP. If Aria comes out into the hallway with nothing but a bath towel wrapped around her, things are gonna get ugly.

"U-Um, I wanted to give you this." Fidgeting, Shirayuki handed me the bundle she was carrying. "I made rice with bamboo sprouts for dinner. They're in season now…and starting tomorrow I'm going to be training at Mount Osore, so I won't be able to make you any meals for a while…"

"O-Oh. Thanks a lot. Well, that's all you came here for, right? You should hurry on home, now. Okay?"

I accepted the bundle and Shirayuki smiled cheerfully. Her cheeks also took on a cherry-color.

"T-To think I made you two meals in one day, i-it's almost like I'm your wife. Oh, what am I saying? Ha ha. I'm so weird. W-What do you

think…Kin-chan?"

"I know, I know! I know, so please Shirayuki get going!"

"'You know?' K-Kin-chan, a-are you saying that…I'm like your w-wi…" In response to my reply, which I had not even given much thought, Shirayuki went into a panic and looked at me with her face brimming with emotion. …*Splash*.

Like an old pond…

From the bathroom…

The sound of water.

Inside my chest, my heart jumped and found a new home somewhere near my shoulder.

"Hm? Do you have company?"

"No, there's no one here but me!" I pushed her along with an arm thrust like a professional sumo wrestler.

"…Kin-chan. Are you hiding something from me?" For some reason, the light vanished from Shirayuki's eyes and her face became utterly expressionless.

"No! Of course not! I'm not hiding *Aria*-! I mean *anything*!"

"…I see. That's good." Shirayuki put on a smile as refreshing as a spring breeze and finally turned to leave.

T-thank God. That takes care of "Scylla." Going back into the apartment, I set the bamboo sprout rice aside and ran into the bathroom.

No time to lose. Now I gotta do something about "Charybdis."

Considering Aria's violent nature, if she found out that I came back while she was taking a bath, there was a good chance she'd mercilessly come after me with her guns blazing. I had to take away her pistols and swords. With this single thought in my head, I kneeled down in front of the laundry basket and plunged my hand inside. And at that very instant, Miss Aria opened the door wide from the bathing section.

"……!"

There was a long silence as we stared into each other's eyes, and that

pleasant scent of gardenias wafted into the bathroom. Aria, with her twin pigtails untied and long hair flowing down around her completely adolescent body, uttered a single word.

"P-Pervert…" she said as she covered her breasts with her right arm and her lower half with her left. The goose bumps became visible on her body when she saw my hands buried in her clothes.

"I-It's not what you think!" I stood up and presented the weapons gripped in my hand to prove my innocence.

Doing so was a mistake.

Being the nervous wreck that I was, I didn't realize that there was a piece of cloth-like material caught on each of the two swords in my hands. One was dangling from the right sword, and the other was dangling from the left sword. I stood there hoisting Aria's bra and panties as if they were hand flags, each decorated with a childish pattern of symbols from a deck of cards.

"DIE!!!!"

"Uwaah!"

Aria lunged at me before I had a chance to go into hysteria mode and kicked me at an angle that sent me flying backwards with my arms and legs out in front of me. She retrieved her undergarments, but I desperately held onto her weapons. "You really need to die, you pervert!!" Aria finished by using her other leg to land a flying knee strike in my face. I think my head caved in about ten inches.

Lord.

I just have one question.

What did I ever do? Why did I have to go through this?

One more question. What's the name of this erotic game my life has turned into?

On second thought, I guess this really isn't the time to be asking such nonsensical questions.

"Cross this line and you're dead."

That's what was written next to the line which was scribbled on the floor I was looking at from the bottom bunk of a bunk bed. *That was obviously written with a marker—a permanent maker.*

I looked up reproachfully at the second bunk bed on the other side of the room where a single pigtail was hanging down from the top bunk.

Damn it. I'd love to yank down on that as hard as I can.

"…Hee hee…peach bun pyramid…"

Aria must have been in a deep slumber because she was talking in her sleep and I could hear her drooling.

Man, this is irritating. Pyramid? What the hell is she talking about?

This was my apartment. In a situation like this, there shouldn't be any need to be considerate to a vicious trespasser, but the fact of the matter was, Aria, who had changed into some light, pink camisole-like pajamas (are those what you call negligee?), was in my bedroom, pistols

at the ready. I might have been sleepy, but with Aria having regained possession of her weapons I had no choice but to lie here, resentfully waiting for her to fall asleep first.

The reason there were two bunk beds was because this apartment was originally made to house four people. Naturally, Aria occupied the top bunk of the other bunk bed since it was the farthest away from mine, but I think the booby trap lead wire and the devices resembling anti-personnel landmines that I was seeing on the floor must have been due to a hallucination. That's what I'm going to believe.

But this girl really is a pain in the butt. She selfishly forces herself into my life, sets up her own territory, and then of all things, orders me to go back to Assault and conduct Butei operations with her. There isn't anything I particularly want to be in the future. I could be anything. Or I could even be nothing. But I know I don't want to be a Butei anymore. That's the one thing I'm definitely not going to be. Feeling rather uneasy, those were the thoughts going through my mind as I was gradually overtaken by sleep.

"Kinji, wake up, you idiot!"

I was woken up by a sudden hammer punch to my stomach and subsequently had a foot planted squarely in my face. That foot in black over-the-knee socks was then promptly twisted back and forth. Light was streaming in through the window. It was morning.

"What are you doing?!" The words came out garbled since I had a foot covering my mouth.

"Breakfast! Hurry up and make it!"

"I'm…not…making…your…breakfast!" I grabbed Aria's ankle with both hands and lifted her foot off of my face.

"If you don't make me breakfast, I'll go hungry!"

"So be hungry, you idiot!"

"Idiot?! Someone like *you* is calling *me* an idiot?!"

Someone like me? What's that supposed to mean?

After dodging an onslaught of punches, I rolled out of bed and darted out of the room the instant I hit the floor.

Why does simply waking up require me to make a daring escape like James Bond?

"I'm hungry! I'm hungry, I'm hungry, I'm hungry, I'm hungry, I'm hungry!"

"If you've got enough energy to scream that loud, you don't need anything to eat!"

While dodging, blocking, and parrying all of Aria's incoming punches and kicks as she continually griped at me, I got changed, grabbed my cell phone and pistol, and picked up my bag. The whole ordeal reminded me of the hand-to-hand combat training I went through in Assault. When I got to the door, I ducked under a high kick, put on my

shoes, and quickly stood up.

"Aria!" With my hand on her smooth, glossy forehead, I held her at arm's length as she persistently threw punches at me. Thanks to the difference in length in our arms, her punches harmlessly found no other target than the air.

This is good. I think I've started to figure out the trick to dodging her attacks. Not that this is something I want to get used to.

"What?" Unable to reach me, Aria calmed down a little bit and looked up at me with a scowl on her face.

"I'm going to wait a few minutes before heading to school. You go on ahead first."

"Why?"

"For every possible reason. Just try leaving this apartment with me lined up besides you and see what happens. If anyone sees us, it's gonna be a big headache. This *is* a men's dormitory, after all."

"You're just trying to come up with a good excuse to get away from me!"

"We're in the same class, and we sit right next to each other! I *can't* get away from you!"

Having said it out loud, I started to lament my misfortune, but it was the truth and there was nothing I could do about it. Aria puffed out her cheeks in discontent.

"Sulking with your face blown up like a balloon isn't going to help. We're leaving this apartment separately."

"I don't care what you say! You're not getting away! You're my slave!" Aria grasped my arm with both hands and stood in a way to show how determined she was not going to let me go.

"Let…go…of…me, you little…!"

"Gah!"

Chomp!

Would you believe it? Aria bared that tooth of hers at me and bit into my hand.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

What are you, a lion cub?

Wrenching my hand out of Aria's mouth, I looked at my wristwatch and saw that it was seven fifty-four.

Crap. I'm gonna miss the seven fifty-eight bus. This isn't the time to be screwing around. Starting today, I'm never going to miss that bus again. After all, my bicycle was reduced to scrap metal.

"My God, you are the biggest pest ever!"

With no other choice, I left the apartment dragging Aria, who was still clinging onto my arm, behind me.

This girl's such a nuisance! A huge nuisance! A colossal nuisance! God damn! But she has this nice sweet and sour fragrance about her! It's so annoying! This is bad. I can't let things go on like this. My everyday life is

currently falling apart because of this incomprehensible "Aria invader". If I'm going to fulfill my goal of becoming an Average Joe, first I have to reclaim my peaceful lifestyle.

Therefore, I spent all of my time after fourth period devising a plan to deal with Aria. From first through fourth period, general education classes were conducted at Butei High just like any other high school, and from fifth period on, each student went through training in his or her own specialized courses. Aria was probably at Assault, participating in combat training right about now. While she was busy with that, I decided to go somewhere she wouldn't be able to find me and work on preparations for a resistance movement. To that end, for the first time in a long time, I went to Inquesta to accept an assignment, which would allow me to leave school grounds.

"Kin--ji."

Upon exiting the building in which the Inquesta department was located, I fell to my knees in despair to see Aria standing there waiting for me. My plan was thwarted before it had even started.

"Why…are *you* here?!"

"Because you're here."

"That doesn't answer my question. Is it okay for you to ditch your Assault class?"

"I already have enough credits to graduate," Aria said, pulling down her lower eyelid with her index finger and sticking her tongue out at me.

Looking at her, I felt like I was going to faint. A girl—a pretty little girl at that—had been waiting for me outside a school building. This was the situation that all high school guys across the country dreamed about. However, when that girl was a ferocious hellcat who threatened you with twin pistols for every little thing, the situation was admittedly ruined.

"So, what kind of jobs do you usually take?" Aria asked.

"It's none of your business. They're simple jobs befitting an E-rank Butei such as myself. Leave me alone."

After a certain amount of training, Butei High students could immediately accept paid jobs from civilians. If students happened to be at the scene of an incident while they were out in the city, they could resolve that as well. It was the achievements accumulated from these jobs and the scores one earned on various tests that determined what rank, from A to E, a student was given. There was an even higher special rank, S, and it was the rank I was given after taking the entrance exam. Well…it was thanks to be being in hysteria mode that was caused by Shirayuki though.

"You're an E-rank?"

"That's right. I didn't take the final exam in the third semester last year. More to the point, rank doesn't hold any meaning for me

anymore."

"Yeah, I don't care about rank, either. But forget about that. Tell me about the job you accepted."

"I'm not obligated to tell you anything."

"You want a hole opened inside you?" Aria placed a hand on her pistol with an irritated look on her face.

"I'm…looking for a cat today."

"A cat?"

"I'm going to look for a cat that got lost in Aomi. It pays one hundred dollars and it's worth one-tenth of a credit."

I chose the lowest paying and tedious job I could find posted on Inquesta's bulletin board. I figured by letting Aria know that straight out, she would lose interest. I was wrong. "Hmm…" she said as she caught up to me when I tried to walk away.

"Stop following me."

"Don't worry about me. Just show me how you perform as a Butei."

"I refuse. Stop following me."

"Do you hate me that much?"

"I absolutely, positively hate you. Stop following me."

"If you say 'Stop following me' one more time, I'm gonna open a–"

I didn't want a hole opened inside me, and I no longer had the energy to deny her, so I went to Aomi via monorail with Aria tagging along beside me. Aomi district, which used to be full of warehouses, had gone through redevelopment and was now a stylish city with expensive condominiums and high-end boutiques lined up one after another.

"So? You said you were going to look for a cat, but what kind of deduction are you going to use to find it?"

"None, really. I'm just gonna walk around every place a cat is likely to go. What about you? Why don't you suggest a plan? If you're asking me, you must have something in mind."

"Nope. I'm not good at deduction. It's kind of weird, but I didn't inherit his most distinctive trait." Aria said somewhat listlessly, looking up at me from underneath that well shaped forehead of hers. "Anyways, I'm hungry."

"Lunch break just ended a little while ago. Didn't you eat anything?"

"I did, but I'm still hungry," Aria whined.

This girl sure has poor fuel consumption.

"Treat me to something."

"You're gonna start getting in my way already?"

That reminds me…I skipped lunch myself today since I was busy selecting a suitable job. I suppose I can just get her something while I'm at it. Plus I don't want to get shot at again. Guess I'll head over to McDonalds.

Being the slave that I was, I went to buy the little princess the Giga Mac Set she requested, and when I got back, she was staring at the well-figured mannequin of a high-class boutique. Aria was looking back and

forth between the sparkling sunny dress the mannequin was dressed in and her own body. I chuckled. *That look in her eyes. I get it. So she admires that sort thing, huh? With her curve-less body like that of an elementary school student's she's gonna have to keep dreaming*.

"Hey."

"Ah." Turning around, Aria must have been able to discern the traces of a smile on my face. Her cheeks instantly turned red and she starting swinging her fists in the air.

"I-It's not like that! T-This is what you call being slender! I'm the slender type!"

"I didn't say a word."

Leaving her behind, I headed towards the park across the street. After finding a nice bench and placing the McDonald's bag on top of it, Aria came and plopped down next to it, looking like she had something to say. Her red Butei High skirt rose into the air slightly, giving me a brief glance of the holster underneath it. It was a phenomenon that Muto called "not quite a panty flash but more of a gun flash." I'm convinced he's a complete idiot. The female students of Butei High concealed their pistols underneath their skirts, and because it was necessary for them to draw their pistols quickly in an emergency, the skirts they wear were generally short. Aria's skirt was no exception and was also rather short. But the reason that didn't make me the least bit happy was probably because she had the body of a grade school student.

"Aria, you should put some distance between us when we go around this park looking for the cat."

"What for?"

The words coming out of our mouths were almost incomprehensible as we spoke to each with our cheeks full of meaty hamburgers.

"Just look around and you'll see." I placed my half-empty Giga Cola on the bench and looked around in the direction of what I was referring to.

This park was a constant gathering place for countless young couples. It was close to the ocean, the scenery was pretty, and it was newly made —all of which were factors that made this place a well-known date spot. Of course, the reason I chose to start our search at this park was because it was the only park in Aomi and thus, a place we were likely to find a cat, but I was also hoping Aria would see what kind of place this was and decide not to walk too close to me. It seemed like my calculations were completely off.

"Ah…" Aria saw a couple of lovers, who appeared to be college students, sitting on the bench across from ours and clinging to each other like pieces of a puzzle. For a brief moment, Aria froze up as she held a French fry between her lips like a cigarette. She then switched her gaze from the couple to me, then back towards to the couple again, and one more final time towards me. Aria's face turned bright red.

This girl blushes too easily.

"Unhh…Unh!" Aria groaned.

Upon seeing a coupled walk past us holding onto each other's arms, Aria became further unsettled and crossed her arms. It was as if she wanted to be certain there was no chance her arms could link up with mine.

"See? You should probably head back to school, Aria. If we walk around together in a place like this, people are going to be convinced we're dating again. I don't want to attract any attention. It'll cause problems for you as well if a guy you like happens to be around and misunderstands."

"There isn't a guy I like!" Aria's ruby colored eyes were open wide as she made a display of that anime voice of hers.

"T-T-There isn't! I couldn't care less about r-romance! It's just a waste of time! I honestly don't care! I'm serious!"

…Don't overreact so much. You're not a kid.

Apparently, Aria was quite the sensitive type when it comes to conversations about love and romance. I've found one of her weaknesses.

"But you don't want your friends to get any weird ideas, do you?"

"Hmph! I don't have any friends. I don't need 'em. If people want to start gossiping, just let them. Who cares what other people say?"

Aria tried to hide her embarrassment by sticking the straw of her Giga Cola in her mouth and taking a long, hard sip.

"Well, I do agree with you about not being concerned with other people, but there is one thing I want to say."

"What?"

"That's my Cola."

Aria spit out the Cola that was about to make its way down her throat.

That's gross. This is a "beautiful yet bashful high school girl"?

As I looked at her, she responded by blushing again.

"You pervert!" Aria then threw a punch at me, knocking me off the bench—an unreasonable outcome, no matter how you look at it.

Evening.

We finally found the lost cat we had been searching for. It was at the waterfront near the edge of the park. Specifically, it was some sort of ditch or canal. Crying softly, the cat had all the characteristics mentioned in the documents I was given, and was wearing the small bell that could be seen in the picture I was provided as well. It was definitely the cat I was after.

"Okay, little one. Be a good kitty…"

The cat, which was inside a garbage can that had fallen into the canal, mustered up all the strength it could and hissed threateningly at me as I drew near.

Don't be like that. I'm not your enemy. I'm here to save you.

I stuck my hands into the pile of crumpled papers and empty cans and pulled out the kitten, which had its fur standing on end.

"That a girl. Aren't you happy? You're safe now."

I wonder if my smile, which I hadn't put on my face for some time, was awkward and unpleasant to look at. As soon as the kitten's eyes met mine, it cried out and struggled to get away.

"H-Hey… W-Whoa!"

Still holding the cat in my hands, I spectacularly fell over backwards into the shallows of the canal. My saving grace was that I left my cell phone and pistol on the bank just in case.

"That's odd…" Aria said to herself. I noticed Aria sigh as she looked down at me from atop the tetra pods she was sitting on.

I received one-tenth of a credit for finding the lost cat and the day came to an end.

"Riko."

I had sent Riko an e-mail asking her to meet me, and there she was, waiting in the greenhouse in front of the girls' dormitory. By greenhouse, I mean a huge vinyl greenhouse that's always deserted and convenient for meeting someone in secret.

"Kii-kuuun!" Near the rose garden, Riko spun around and greeted me.

Riko was just about as small as Aria, but she belonged to what you

would call the “pretty little girl” category. She had two large sparkling eyes and her wavy hair was done in dog ears. It was an audacious hairstyle that incorporated twin pigtails into the long, soft hair flowing onto her back.

“Still wearing that custom made uniform, I see. What is that white fluffy mess?”

“It’s the Butei High school uniform arranged in a white Lolita fashion! Kii-kun, you really need to memorize all the different Lolita styles.”

“No thanks. Geez, exactly how many uniforms do you have?”

While watching Riko start counting with her fingers all the different types of custom-made uniforms she had, from my bag, I pulled out a paper bag that I used to carefully hide some video game software.

“Riko, look at me. Listen, keep this a secret from Aria.”

“Oh, you got it!” Riko stood to attention and saluted with both hands.

I handed her the paper bag with a bitter expression on my face and she ripped it to shreds in the process of opening it while breathing so heavily through her nose that it was audible.

She’s just like a wild animal.

“Oh my God! It’s, *White and Black*, *The Tale of White Clover*, and *My Goth*!” Riko cried out.

Riko was jumping up and down waving the R-15 games around in both hands. They were basically girl games that a person couldn’t purchase unless they were fifteen years old. You could assume as much from her outfit, but Riko was an *otaku*. However, what set her apart from the average *otaku* is the fact that she had an unusual interest in girl games, despite being a girl. She showed an especially strong obsession for games in which the heroine wore the same frilly, fluffy clothing as she did. Of course, Riko was fifteen years old herself, so she was capable of buying these games. But she was complaining to me the other day about how she couldn’t buy an R-15 game at the video shop, which also served as a game shop here on Academy Island. Apparently, the girl working there judged her to be a middle school student after seeing how short she was. That’s why I went and bought them for her. It was dreadfully embarrassing, and I’m sure the salesgirl misunderstood my intentions, but it was necessary if I were going to come up with some countermeasures to deal with Aria.

Why did Aria want to make me her slave, anyway? That’s the first mystery I needed to solve in order to get rid of her. If there was some definite reason, I had to do something about it as soon as possible. And since Aria wouldn’t tell me what that reason is, I had no choice but to deal with the matter by doing a thorough investigation on her and making my own deductions. The outcome of the battle between two Butei would be determined by the information that each had on one another.

"Ah…I don't need this one or this one. I hate these types."

Huh? I could have sworn these were all the kind of games she likes. With a perturbed expression on her face, Riko gave me back *My Goth Two and Three*, the sequels.

"Why? These are the same as the others aren't they?"

"No. *Two* and *Three* are profanations. They're an insult to the original and don't deserve to have the same title."

…This girl sure has bizarre reasons for getting upset.

"Well…whatever. In that case, I'll give you all the games except for the sequels. In exchange, be sure to tell me everything about your investigation on Aria, just like what we discussed the other day.

"You got it!"

Riko was an idiot—an undeniable idiot. But what I found out at Inquesta was that while she may be an idiot, she did have one redeeming quality. Riko, who in addition to being an Internet addict, also had other hobbies truly fitting for a Butei such as spying on others, eavesdropping, and hacking, making her exceptionally adept at gathering information. You could say she was a modern intelligence thief. Apparently, that's the reason she's a rank-A Butei.

"Alright then, let's get on with it. I had to pretend to go to the bathroom and escape through the window using the wire in my belt to rappel down to get here. It's only a matter of time before Aria realizes and comes to detain me."

I took a look around me and sat down on a railing just high enough to put my foot on.

Riko put the games away inside her clothing and sat down beside me with a small hop. Her feet didn't reach the floor, and she swung them back and forth.

"Say Kii-kun, are you being henpecked by Aria? She's your girlfriend, so if you want to know about her profile, you should just ask her directly yourself."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"What? Rumor has it you two are a bona-fide couple. The Aria fan club is in an uproar saying they're going to kill you because you were seen leaving the dorm hand–in-hand with Aria in the morning. Roaar!"

"You don't have to make horns with your fingers."

Hand in hand? Must've been that morning. I was just dragging her along because she wouldn't let go of me…

"So how far have you two gone?"

"What do you mean 'how far'"?

"X-rated stuff."

"We haven't don't anything like that you, numbskull!"

"Oh, come on! You two are a healthy, young couple!" All smiles, Riko nudged me in the ribs with her elbow.

"…You're always taking the conversation in that direction. It's a bad

habit of yours."

"Phooey."

"Let's get down to business already. Information on Aria…let's start by having you tell me about her evaluation at Assault."

"Okie-dokie. Hmm…as far her rank, she's S. You could count the number of second year students with an S-rank using one hand."

To be honest, what she just said didn't surprise me. All I had to do was recall the way she handled herself during the bicycle-jacking. Her abilities were obviously on a completely different scale from most others.

"She's smaller than I am, but she's also skilled at hand-to-hand combat. The styles she specializes in range from boxing to grappling techniques. Anything goes. She's basically a Vale…Vale…Vale ti…"

"Vale Tudo?"

"Yeah, that's it. She can use that. In England, it's shortened to just 'Valetsu.'"

I recalled the moment when I was thrown by Aria in the gym storehouse. It was certainly impressive, that's for sure. I was in hysteria mode, yet the most I could do was perform a defensive fall.

"Her skill with pistols and knives is on a genius level. She uses two of each. That girl is ambidextrous."

"I know."

"Well, do you know the other name she goes by?"

A nickname, huh? Butei who were capable could pride themselves on an abundance of achievements naturally come to have nicknames. Aria already had a nickname at the mere age of sixteen? I made an expression that said I had no idea, and Riko smiled proudly.

"Aria the Quadra."

Quadra.

In Butei terms, using twin pistols or twin swords was called "double." It stemmed from the English word "double", so by analogy, her nickname probably meant someone who uses four weapons.

"Isn't that funny? 'Quadra.'" Riko said.

"I'm not really sure where you see the humor in it, but…whatever. What else? Tell me about how Aria has performed as a Butei. What merits has she achieved?"

"Ah, I found out some pretty amazing stuff about that. She's on a leave of absence right now, but since the age of fourteen, Aria's been serving as a Butei of the London Bureau of Butei, and she was active all over Europe." Switching to a slightly more serious tone of voice, Riko looked up at me with her big eyes. "They say that during that period, she never once let a criminal escape from her."

"Never…once?"

"She's arrested every person she's ever set her sights on. It's happened ninety-nine times in a row. Not only that, but she caught

them all on her first assault."

"What? Are you serious?

Unbelievable.

In most cases, when the job of arresting a criminal fell to a Butei, it was because the criminal became too much for the police to handle, so the task was thrust upon us. The Butei would persistently hunt them down (this was called an "assault" using Butei terminology) until they finally arrested the perpetrator. But succeeding ninety-nine times in a row and all on the first attempt… That's the kind of monster I've got chasing after me? Just thinking about it was about to send me into a fit of depression, so I decided to change the subject.

"Uhh…what else? How about personal details?"

"Let's see. Her father is half-British and half-Japanese."

"So she's a quarter Japanese."

No wonder both her hair and eyes are red, and she has big, bright eyes, uncommon for a Japanese person. I mean, her name is Aria H. Kanzaki.

"That's right. And her middle name, which starts with "H", is the family name of her British relatives. They seem to be a very renowned family. Her grandmother has the title of Dame."

"Dame?"

"It's a title the royal family of England bestows to people. Men who are bestowed a decoration are given the title, 'Sir'. Women are given the title, 'Dame'."

"Hold up. That means she's an aristocrat."

"Yup. A real noblewoman. But from the looks of things, Aria isn't getting along well with her "H" relatives. That's why she doesn't like mentioning her middle name. I know what it is though. That family is a bit…well…"

"Tell me. I gave you the games."

"You know, I really hate people who reap the benefits just because of their parent's influence. If you search the British web sites, I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"English isn't my forte."

"Give it your best!" said Riko, who attempted to pat me on the back but missed and slapped my wrist instead. "Oh?"

As a result, my wristwatch came off and landed near my feet. I stooped to pick it up and found that the clasp of the metal band had broken.

"Ah! I-I'm sorry!"

"It was a cheap watch. No big deal. I bought it for twenty bucks at Odaiba."

"No, let me fix it! I'll make it as good as new! If anyone finds out I broke something that belongs to a client, it'll affect my credibility!" Riko yanked the watch from out of my hand, and pulling down on the collar of her blouse she placed the watch securely between her cleavage.

Whoa.

I averted my eyes.

T-Those were pretty large…

"Kinji? Anything else you want to know?"

"…Uh, no, that'll do."

I didn't want to go into hysteria mode in front of a girl, and things would probably get complicated if she realized I saw her breasts. Therefore, I took my leave and left the greenhouse behind me. *Gold, huh? This world sure has a lot of different colored undergarments*.

I returned to my apartment and looked out the window at Academy Island, which was tinted gold by the setting sun. This Mega-Float, consisting of nothing but Butei High, the dormitories, and some stores geared towards students, was purchased relatively cheaply, as it was originally a failed attempt at redeveloping Tokyo Bay. As proof, there was another Mega-Float with the exact same shape on the other side of Rainbow Bridge directly to the north. It was still just vacant land and thus, dubbed "Empty Island." The blades of wind turbines that were built on the southern edge of that deserted Mega-Float idly spun in circles.

Yup. It sure is peaceful. I'm rather partial to this scenery.

"Typhoon No. 1, which appeared over the Pacific Ocean, has yet to weaken and is now making its way north through Okinawa."

The LCD television broadcasted the news, only helping to make the comfortable silence in the room more noticeable.

Ahh, this is such a nice apartment.

With the exception of the fact that a girl is inside it.

"What are you just standing there for?" Aria tilted her head to the side as she sat on the sofa looking at me with a mirror in her hand.

She must have been looking for split ends to pass the time. To finish up, she lifted her bangs and fastened them down with a silver barrette, displaying her forehead. It was a somewhat childish looking barrette, but it suited her cute-small demeanor. She's probably aware that her smooth, glossy forehead is her most attractive feature.

"How did you get in here?"

I had a feeling it was a dumb question, but I asked anyway as a way of protest.

"I am a Butei, you know." See? Dumb question. She probably forged a card key to this apartment. Opening locked doors is the most basic of Butei skills, after all.

"Did you plan on just leaving a lady waiting outside the door? That's unforgiveable."

"A person who lashes out at others when she's the one in the wrong isn't called a lady, you GBF."

"GBF?"

"It means 'girl with a big forehead.'"

"You don't understand the appeal of my forehead?! You truly are a failure as a human being," Aria said, sticking her tongue out at me.

Oh, I understand. The truth is I understand very well. You're cute alright. But only visually. "This forehead is my charm point. It's even been featured in a hairstyle magazine for girls in Italy."

Aria turned her back to me and seemed to be enjoying herself as she looked at her forehead in the mirror. She even started humming. In order to have her take notice of the bad mood I was in, I threw my bag in her direction, sending it flying past her on the side. But Aria, too, had grown accustomed to our little squabbles and simply continued to gaze happily at her forehead.

"That's a noblewoman for you—always careful to make sure you look your best," I said sarcastically as I turned my back on her and headed to the lavatory.

"…You did some checking-up on me, didn't you?" Aria said in a surprisingly happy tone.

"Yeah. Apparently you really haven't let a single criminal escape you."

"Oh? You've really done your homework. Now you're looking more like a Butei. But…" Aria leaned her back against the wall and made a little kicking motion with her foot. "The other day, I let one get away from me. It was the first time ever."

"Oh, is that so? The person must have been quite formidable. Who did you let escape?"

Well, well. Looks like there was a mistake in Riko's information.

I filled a cup with water from the faucet and started to gargle.

"You."

The water came spraying out of my mouth.

Me?! Oh, she's talking about our scuffle after the bicycle-jacking incident!

"*I'm* not a criminal! Why are you including *me*?!"

"You were guilty of indecent assault…against me! Are you going to pretend it never happened after the way you attacked me like a beast?! You worm!"

From slave to beast to worm—my regression knows no bounds.

"I told you, that was out of my control! And I didn't go as far as you say, anyway!"

"Oh, shut up! Just shut up! In any case…!" Aria pointed at me with her face as red as ever. "You might have the potential to become my slave! Come back to Assault and show me the skill you displayed when you ran away that time!"

"That was…at that time…I just happened to get away by chance. You do realize I'm an E-ranked guy, who's not capable of much, don't you? Sorry to disappoint you. Now leave."

"You liar! Your rank was S when you took the entrance exam!"

Uh-oh. So that's how she's gonna respond, huh?

The outcome of a battle between Butei was determined by the information at their disposal. If Aria was aware of my rank, that was going to make things difficult.

"In other words, what you did didn't happen by just pure chance! My intuition is never wrong!"

"A-anyway, I can't do it now! So leave!"

"'Now'? Does that mean there's some sort of conditions that need to be met? Tell me. I'll cooperate with you."

Upon hearing that, I was the one who turned red.

You'll cooperate, huh?

Naturally, Aria didn't know what triggers my hysteria mode, so she offered her help straightforwardly, but the remark had an explosive effect on me. After all, what she was basically saying was that she would make me sexually aroused!

"Tell me! Tell me what needs to be done! I'll assist you as compensation for being my slave!"

"……!"

I couldn't help it. All sorts of images of Aria "assisting" me surfaced in my head. It's kind of late at this point, but when I think about it, Aria and I *are* all alone in this apartment…and without realizing it the sun had set, leaving the two of us in a dimly lit room with the lights turned off.

What? No, don't. Stop thinking.

"I'll do whatever you want! Tell me…just tell me, Kinji…!"

Aria came up next to me, and that scent like gardenias tickled my nose once again. I…

"Ngh…"

This is taking a turn for the worse.

Because of the unnecessary thoughts entering my head, I was starting to go into hysteria mode. I wonder if this is what's called the power of one's eyes. Aria's round eyes, red as a camellia, looked so pretty…so cute… I was struck by that sensation again—that sensation of boiling blood filling the very core of me body.

Not again. I don't want to become "that." I don't want to enter that mode!

"…!"

Unconsciously, I thrust Aria away from me. She let out a small cry in that anime-like voice and fell to the couch, landing on her rear end. I just barely managed to avert my eyes in time as her short skirt flew high into the air. With things having come this far, I had no choice, so I made the decision to raise the white flag.

"…Just once."

"Just once?"

I wouldn't be surrendering unconditionally though. I was going to add a condition.

"I'll go back. I'll go back to Assault. But I'm only going to partner

with you once. I'll help you resolve the first case that turns up after I return to Assault, but only that one case. Those are my terms."

"…"

"So I won't be switching departments. I'll be auditing an Assault course. You're fine with that, right?"

Turning around to face Aria, who had just finished tidying up her skirt, I could see that she was contemplating my offer as she pointed her well-shaped forehead at me.

At Butei High, students could take specialized courses offered by divisions aside from the one they were enrolled in. This was called auditing, and students didn't receive any credit, but in order to become a Butei, which required the knowledge of a multitude of techniques, students were fairly active in taking courses taught at various divisions. The great Butei, Aria wanted her own slave…er, pawn. She wanted one badly. And she set her sights on me, because I managed to escape from her in hysteria mode. "I might be able to use this guy as a capable slave," is probably what she was thinking. There wasn't much I could do about this. If I were to compare the situation to a game of Old Maid, it would be like a card that Aria already took away from me. I did still have one card hidden up my sleeve, however—hysteria mode. All I had to do was show Aria what the average me was normally capable of before she found out the details of this attribute of mine. If I could do that, Aria would be disappointed in me since I couldn't do anything all that spectacular, and she'll probably distance herself from me.

"…All right. I'll go ahead and leave this apartment then."

The colossal thorn in my side accepted my conditions and finally announced that she would be leaving.

"I don't have a lot of time myself. I'll determine how skilled you are during that one case."

"…Only one, regardless of how simple it might be."

"Okay. And in exchange, you have to see it through until the end, regardless of how complicated it might be."

"Fine."

"But if you hold back or cut any corners, I'll open a hole in you."

"Right. I'll give it everything I've got. I promise."

Everything I've got while I'm the normal me, that is.

Third Bullet Assault Division

I've come back—back to the Assault division, also known as the "there's no tomorrow division." The percentage of survivors in this division at the time of graduation was ninety-seven point one percent. In other words, out of every one hundred students, roughly three wouldn't live to graduate. They would lose their lives while either on a mission or during training. This was the truth. That's how things were in the Assault division. It was the part about being a Butei that was kept in the shadows. I could hear the sound of gunshots and swords clashing against each other coming from the Assault division's facilities. But today, I had been making sure my equipment was in order and filing an application to audit and whatnot, so I used up most of my time on everything except actually training. I was only going to be handling one case, but I wanted to get some target practice in at least. It didn't look like it was going to happen. However, in Assault, where students always form parties and operate together, people naturally become quite affable…

"Oh! Kinji! I knew you would come back! Come on in and end your life as quickly as possible, even if it's just one second earlier!"

"So you're still not dead yet, huh, Natsumi? Do me a favor and die one tenth of second earlier than I do."

"Kinji! You finally came back to die, huh?! An idiot like you can die in no time! It's the idiotic Butei that die first, after all."

"Then why are you still alive, Mikami?"

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Telling others to die was the way of greeting people here, but by returning this greeting to all these people happy to see me back and telling me to die I just lost even more time. After getting away from these guys reeking of gunpowder and leaving the Assault facilities, there was a little midget with her back leaned against the front gate waiting for me under the sunset sky. Needless to say, it was Aria. Upon seeing me, Aria came scuttling in my direction. She then lined up beside me as I walked onward with a sullen look on my face.

"…You're pretty popular aren't you? I was a little surprised."

"It's not that I want to be liked by these guys."

I was telling the truth.

"You're not very sociable. You kind of have that 'dark and gloomy

type' aura about you. Everyone here seems to…how should I put it? They seem to think rather highly of you."

That was probably because they remembered what I was like during the entrance exam. They remembered what I was like in hysteria mode. The exam given to those of us applying to join the Assault division was one consisting of actual combat in which the goal was to disperse ourselves inside a fourteen-story abandoned building and while armed, arrest every other participant. In record time, I tied up all of the others who were either personally defeated by me or ensnared in a trap I had set—including five instructors who, as part of a "pop quiz," were lurking in the building without our knowledge.

Damn it.

I went and remembered something I wanted to forget. Aria must have noticed that my mood had grown worse because her gaze dropped to the ground as she walked beside me.

"Um, Kinji?"

"What?"

"Thanks."

"What are you talking about all of a sudden?" I replied in a low, though irritated tone to Aria who had an honest look of happiness on her face.

I'll bet you are happy. You literally got your "slave" who's going to be fighting on your behalf.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I only came back to Assault because I had no other choice. I'm going right back to Inquesta after resolving one case."

"I know. But…"

"What?"

"You were pretty cool walking around Assault with everyone crowding around you."

"…"

Why are you telling me something like that?

I'm pretty sure it wasn't her intention, but by having a girl—a girl who only *looks* cute, at that—say something like that to me, I was at a loss for words.

"Nobody comes *near* me at Assault. There's too much of a difference in skill and no one can keep up with me… Well, that's perfectly fine though. I'm 'Aria' after all."

"'Aria'?" Puzzled, I tilted my neck to the side when Aria said her name with a different inflection than usual.

"'Aria' also means a voice solo in an opera. It's a part sung by oneself. All alone—that's what I am at every Butei high school. That's how it was in London, and that's how it was in Rome."

"So your plan is to make me your slave and change the performance to a duet?"

Aria giggled as I made the remark without even looking at her. Looking at her from the corner of my eye, she truly did seem to be laughing genuinely.

"You can say some pretty amusing things, after all."

"There wasn't anything amusing about it."

"Yes there was."

"I don't get your sense of humor."

"The second you returned to Assault you really did become a little more animated. Up until yesterday, you never seemed like you were being honest with yourself. It was as if you were in pain. You're a lot more appealing now."

"That's…not true."

Aria made another embarrassing statement. I didn't want to hear it. I had a feeling what she was saying might be true.

"I'm gonna stop by the VA. You go on home by yourself. Now that I think about it, starting today, you're going back to the girls' dormitory. There's no point in you leaving school with me."

"We're headed in the same direction until we get to the bus stop," Aria said as she stuck her tongue out at me with a smile.

She was as spiteful as ever, but Aria seemed to be truly happy that she was able to bring me back to Assault. I could tell from the expression on her face. She was so easy to figure out. Aria definitely wasn't suited for Inquesta.

"Say, what's a 'VA'?"

"It's an abbreviation for video arcade. You don't even know that?"

"It's not my fault. I've spent most of my life in Europe. Hmm…I'll go with you then. Today I'll make an exception and do you the favor of hanging out with you. Consider it a reward."

"Don't need it. That's not a reward, it's a penalty game."

I started to pick up my pace and distance myself from Aria. Aria responded by grinning and after catching up, increased her walking speed to match mine. She was starting to really get on my nerves so I took larger strides and walked even faster. Aria continued to keep up, her skirt dancing back and forth.

"Don't follow me! I don't even want to see your face right now!"

"Then I'm definitely gonna keep following you!"

"Don't!"

In the end, we wound up running together side by side until we reached the arcade.

What's with this girl? She's abnormally fast.

"Huff, huff, huff, what is this?" asked Aria, who was standing so close her twin pigtails were brushing up against me.

Her red eyes were fixed on a crane game situated in front of the arcade.

"Huff…huff. This? It's a UFO Catcher."

“UFO Catcher? That’s kind of a childish name.” Well, it’s a game available at the sort of place *you* would go to, so it’s bound to be ridiculous. Aria peered inside the crane game with a sarcastic look on her face. Behind the glass casing was an abundance of small stuffed animals that seemed to be a bizarre cross between a lion and a leopard.

“…ah…!” uttered Aria pressing herself against the glass casing.

The combination of her height and the background full of stuffed animals made her look unquestionably like an elementary school student. If a police officer were to see this, she would probably be taken away and reprimanded.

“What? You’ve never seen one of these?”

“…”

“What is it already?”

“…”

“Are you hungry or something?”

“……They’re so cute……”

Huh?

Hearing her whisper that line was so unlike her, I momentarily grew weak at the knees. Sure, the stuffed animals behind the glass casing were cute…but it wasn’t something you would hear coming out of the mouth of Aria the Quadra, the Butei who prided herself on her demon-like strength and slaughtering all enemies on sight. I thought I would point out how her personality had just switched to that of a different person’s, but as I came next to her, I saw drool hanging from her mouth, which was in the shape of an upside-down triangle. *We can’t have this. This isn't the type of face that should be exposed to the public*.

“Want to give it a shot?”

“I don’t know how.”

“Even a kindergartener could work this thing.”

“Can it be done right away?”

“It can. Want me to show you how it works?”

Aria turned towards me and repeatedly nodded her head up and down.

What’s gotten into her? She’s completely throwing me off balance.

The rules weren’t so complicated that they actually needed explaining, but after I told her to press the vertical and horizontal buttons in order, Aria took out a coin pouch decorated with symbols from a deck of cards and found a quarter. She then stood up straight in front of the machine, inserted the coin, and began to operate the crane with a look of seriousness you’d be more likely to see when she was attending sniping class. Her aim wasn’t very precise, however. The crane only just slightly lifted a leg of the lion-leopard hybrid; the stuffed animal itself didn’t budge. “T-That was just practice. I know how it works now.”

“Well, yeah, even an idiot would understand how it works after

trying it once."

"I'm gonna try one more time."

Aria took another one hundred yen coin out of her coin pouch, and after inserting it into the machine, once again started pressing the four control buttons. This time she only succeeded in lifting the tail of one of the stuffed animals. She wasn't very good at this game.

"By the way, if you put in five quarters, you get six chances."

"Oh, be quiet! I'll get it the next time! I got the hang of it now!"

That's exactly what people who don't have the hang of it say.

As I expected, the crane continued to just graze the stuffed animal.

"Ngggggh!"

"Don't have a mental breakdown now, Aria."

"I got it for sure this time! I'm serious!"

After two more failed attempts, Aria went to the change machine and got ten dollars worth of quarters, only to continue her losing streak.

"This time I'm really serious! Really, really, really, reaaaaally serious!"

She's hopeless. I better do something about this fast. Not only does Aria have the look, but also the mentality of an elementary school student. She's the type that would ruin herself if she ever got addicted to gambling.

"Out of the way."

After watching Aria squander about thirty dollars, I couldn't bear to stand by any longer and unwillingly took out my wallet. The proud noblewoman had tears welling up in her eyes and wouldn't take her hands off the buttons, but I shoved her out of the way.

Let's see now. Hmm...This one by the hole is a good target.

I set my sights on a mysterious cat-like animal that was buried underneath many others and looked like it was in a difficult position to get to at first glance. Every stuffed animal in the casing was exactly the same, so regardless of which one I chose, she probably wouldn't complain. The crane lowered in on my target and perfectly grasped the body of the stuffed animal.

"Ngh…!"

I could hear Aria making a noise with her throat as she swallowed hard.

"What have we here?" I soon realized that the tag of another stuffed animal was caught on the tail of the stuffed animal I captured. The crane lifted up the one I originally targeted, and that stuffed animal brought along another one dangling from its tail.

"Kinji, look! You fished out two of them!"

I can see that plain as day without you telling me. And fishing isn't exactly the right term.

"Kinji, you're in big trouble if you let them go!"

"At this point, it's out of my hands!"

"Oh…oh, it's almost there! It's almost there! Get in there!"

Though not as much as Aria, I found myself rather anxious as well. One was a done deal. But the other…I wasn't so sure. *Will it make it? Will it make it?*

The crane released its grip. The first stuffed animal fell into the hole…and the other followed suit, dragged along by the tail of the first.

"You did it!"

"Alright!"

It was quite a pleasing outcome. And before I knew it—it really did just kind of happen automatically—Aria and I were high-fiving each other with huge smiles on our faces.

"Ah" we said at the same time and blinked our eyes.

"Hmph." We also said this at the same time as we became agitated and turned our backs on each other.

Damn it.

I was angry with myself. Why was I getting along with a person like this? Aria is…

"F-For an idiot like you, that was very well done!"

Aria thrust her hands into the prize slot with so much force, I thought she was going to jump inside the machine herself, but instead, she simply snatched up the two stuffed animals and pulled them out. Taking a closer look, I saw their tags which had the name "Leopon" written on them.

What kind of name is that?

"They're sooooo cute!"

Aria squeezed them in her hands and hugged them tightly. Leopon looked like he was going to burst. Seeing Aria like that, she resembled a "normal" girl so strongly that I felt—how should I put it—a strange sensation come over me.

Maybe…Could it possibly be…that Aria really was just a normal girl like any other?

That would mean what Aria told me just a while ago could actually be applied to her… Aria was the one always being dishonest with herself and pushing herself too hard. Was there something constraining her true self and forcing her to be somebody she wasn't?

"Kinji."

Facing Aria, I noticed that her arm was extended towards me, offering one of the two stuffed animals.

"I'll give you one. You won them, so this is your reward."

I was a bit taken aback by Aria's slanted eyes, which emphasized the smile on her face.

What do you know...She can make expressions like that. Damn it. She looks so cute.

"R-Right." I accepted the Leopon and realized for the first time that it was actually a strap for a cell phone.

Now that I think about it, I've never put a strap on my cell phone. Guess

I'll try attaching it.

I took out my cell phone and slipped the cord of the strap into the hole at the bottom. Seeing this, Aria took out a pearl pink cell phone and by watching my example, began to attach her own Leopon, though she was having a hard time. Coincidentally, it would seem as if she didn't have a cell phone strap either. The string protruding from Leopon's rear end was fairly thick and wouldn't fit into the hole so easily. Why did the designers of this stuffed animal even place a cord on an unusual spot?

"Kinji, whoever gets their strap on first is the winner."

"What are you talking about? Are you some kind of little kid?"

"I got it. I think it's about to go through."

"Mine…is on its way too. I'm not losing to you."

I suddenly realized that this might be the first time I ever received anything from a girl. Shirayuki was always giving me some sort of gift or the other, but she was a childhood friend, so that didn't count.

The two of us stood there grunting as a battle to strap Leopon to our cell phones unfolded. I had to admit, it was pretty petty.

With the freeloader gone, my apartment had returned to its original calm and quiet state. I woke up this morning alone in my peaceful bedroom to the alarm of my cell phone. I tried to grab a hold of it, but my hands closed in on Leopon instead.

"…"

After looking at Leopon for a short while, I listlessly prepared to go to school. Finishing the leftovers from a meal I bought at the convenience store, I looked at my wristwatch, which Riko returned to me yesterday.

"?"

I still have some time. I could have sworn I had been loafing around a bit more than that. Guess I'll make some tea.

That's odd.

I had left my apartment a little ahead of time like I was supposed to. Yet, the seven fifty-eight bus had already arrived at the bus stop where large, warm raindrops started falling from the sky. Other students were pushing and shoving and trying to get onboard. When arriving at this bus stop, which was within the school district, just before first period was about to begin the bus would always be crowded. If you were unlucky, it might get filled to capacity before you had the chance to get on.

"Yes! I got on! Sweet victory! Hey, Kinji! Mornin'!"

As I ran up next to the bus, Muto from Logi was on the ramp lifting his arms into the air in celebration. Behind him, students were jam-packed.

Not good.

It would seem that due to the rain, all the students who commuted by bicycle decided to use the bus.

“M-Muto! Let me on!”

“I’d love to, really, but no can do! It’s completely full! Come to school on your bike!”

I motioned with my hands for Muto to go farther in and make some space but the fact of the matter was he was trying to keep from getting pushed out.

“My bike was totaled! If I don’t get on this bus, I’m gonna be late!”

“What can't be done, can’t be done! Kinji, it’s important for a guy to know when to give up! Just ditch first period! Having said that, I guess I’ll see you during second period!”

“*I’ll see you at second period” my ass!*

The doors of the bus cruelly closed in my face leaving me with nothing but the words of my heartless “friend”, Muto. The chatter and laughter I heard coming from inside filled me with envy.

Damn. I gotta walk in this pouring rain? Not only that but I’m gonna be late for sure.

I walked along the path to school with the rain beating down on my shoulders, and my eye’s glaring at the perfectly straight road that continued down Academy Island as far as I could see. One of the reasons Mega-Floats went into development to begin with was so that a runway for an airport could be made relatively cheap. It was no wonder this school had such a pointlessly long and awkward shape. That in itself was already off-putting, but now I had this uncomfortably warm rain to deal with as well. Unpleasantness to the one thousandth power.

Maybe I should just ditch first period like Muto said. No, I can’t do that. First period is Japanese. I need to attend general education courses so I can keep up in class when I transfer to a normal high school. I don’t want to skip class.

I was walking past the Assault division’s black gymnasium with these thoughts in my head when my cell phone rang.

Pulling on the Leopon strap, I took out my cell phone and answered it.

“Hello?”

“Kinji, where are you right now?”

It was Aria.

What gives? It’s already eight twenty. Class should have already started so why is she calling me?

“Uhh, I’m next to the Assault department.”

“That’s perfect. Go in and arm yourself with class C equipment and come to the roof of the girls’ dormitory. Hurry.”

“What’s the big idea? Assault class isn’t until fifth period.”

I complained and Aria raised her voice in anger.

“It’s not for class; there’s been an incident! When I say ‘hurry’, it means get moving!”

I looked at myself in disgust. TNK bulletproof vest. Helmet with

enhanced plastic face guard. Wireless headset with Butei High's emblem printed on it. Fingerless gloves. On my belt, which was so tight that it was biting into my waist, hung a gun holster and four spare magazines. This class C equipment, which resembled that of an SAT or SWAT officer, was the aggressive equipment that Butei wore when they entered the fray. Many of the cases in which the Assault division got involved were quite dangerous, and I was often instructed to equip myself in just this manner.

A case.

Regarding what? What had happened? Dear Lord, let it be a trivial one.

With that prayer in my heart, I emerged onto the roof, and there was Aria, being hammered by the rain and dressed in the same class C equipment I was wearing. She was yelling into a handheld transceiver and had a ghastly expression on her face.

"…?"

I suddenly noticed that Reki from Snipe was sitting under the eaves by the stairway with her knees pulled up and feet flat on the ground. Aria was a shrewd one. She was a transfer student, but she knew who the top players were. Like me, Reki was given a rank of S when she entered this school. But unlike me, she was still an S-rank affiliated with the Snipe division. Reki was what you would call a prodigy. She had a thin build and was taller than Aria by half a head's length. Her skill was undisputed, and she was a pretty looking girl with her hair cut short, but she didn't stand out very much because of her unemotional, robotic personality. As a side note, nobody knew what her last name was. Apparently, not even she knew.

"Reki."

I called out to the girl, who was sitting as still as a piece of furniture, but she didn't respond. That was to be expected, however. She had on large headphones and was listening to something. When I was in Assault last year, I paired up with her from time to time in the course of completing a few jobs, but it looked like she still hadn't broken that bad habit of hers. After poking her in the head with my finger a few times, she finally took off her headphones and looked up at me. As always, she had such well-formed features that you would suspect her face was a product of computer graphics.

"Were you called here by Aria, too?"

"Yes," answered Reki in her monotone voice.

"Actually, what I really want to know about is those headphones. What kind of music are you always listening to?"

"It's not music."

"What is it then?"

"The sound of the wind," Reki said plainly and repositioned the sniper rifle—a slim, semi-automatic gun called a Dragunov—resting on her shoulder as naturally as if it were a tennis racket or something of

that nature.

"We're out of time." Aria had finished her conversation and turned to face us. "I wanted at least one more S-rank student with us, but they're all out working on other cases."

Apparently, in Aria's mind, my rank had been promoted to a much higher one than it actually was.

"We're going to go after them as a party of three. I'll make up for what we lack in firepower."

"Pursue what? What happened? At least give a proper briefing."

"It's a bus-jacking."

"…Bus?"

"The school bus for Butei High commuters. It's the one that stopped in front of your dormitory at seven fifty-eight."

Say what?! Are you telling me that bus was hijacked? Muto and a lot of other Butei High students are crammed together like sardines on that bus.

"…Is the culprit onboard the bus?"

"I'm not sure, but in all likelihood, I'd say no. The bus has been rigged with a bomb."

A bomb. Upon hearing that word, the bicycle-jacking incident that took place a few days ago darted through my mind. Aria must have picked up on what I was thinking because she cast me a sidelong glance.

"Kinji, this is 'Butei killing.' It's the work of the same criminal who tampered with your bicycle."

…Butei killing?

I knit my eyebrows upon hearing those familiar words. It was the widely used term for the serial murders that Shirayuki was talking about the other day.

"The first Butei to be victimized had his motorcycle hijacked. Next it was a carjacking. After that was your bicycle. This time it's a bus… In all instances, the culprit rigs the vehicle with a bomb that's designed to explode when speed is reduced, effectively imprisoning the victim inside the vehicle. The bomb can also be activated by remote control. But there's a pattern in the radio frequency that the culprit uses to control the vehicle. I figured out the pattern when I saved you last time and this time as well."

"But the criminal behind the 'Butei killings' was apprehended."

"That person wasn't the true culprit."

"Say what? Wait a second. What are you talking about?"

It didn't make sense. There were too many holes in the conversation we were having. Still, Aria turned towards me and gave me an intense look with a hint of irritation in her eyes. "There's no time to explain all the background information and there's no need for you to know. I'm the leader of this party."

Aria placed her hands on her waist and stuck out her chest. Reki, standing nearby like a statue, gave Aria a brief glance.

“Wait… Wait, Aria! You–”

“This case is already underway! The bus could explode at this very moment! Our mission is to rescue everyone onboard! That’s all there is to it!”

“If you want to be the leader, go ahead! But if you’re the leader, give the members of your team a proper explanation! Butei risk their lives when they head out for any kind of mission!”

“Butei Charter, Article One, ‘Believe in your comrades and help one another’! The victims are our Butei High comrades! There’s no need for any other explanation!”

Above us, another loud sound could be heard amidst the pouring rain. It was the sound of a helicopter. Looking up, we saw a Logi single-rotor helicopter with a blue revolving light coming down to land on the rooftop of the girls’ dormitory. Aria…She had covered all bases and even arranged for something like this. If this was how things were going to proceed, then there certainly wasn’t any time to hear an explanation.

“…To hell with it. All right, I’m in! That’s what you want to hear, isn’t it?!”

Aria looked at me as I yelled out, and with her drenched twin pigtails flying about in the gusts created by the helicopter…she smiled.

“Kinji, looks like this is going to be that first case we made a promise about.”

“Quite a case at that. I gotta be the unluckiest guy in the world.”

“Keep your end of the bargain. I’m looking forward to seeing your true skills.”

“I’m letting you know in advance, but I don’t have the kind of ability that you think I do. It’s also been a while since I’ve done this sort of thing. Are you really sure you want to bring an E-rank Butei along with you on a mission as difficult as this?”

“If by the off chance you get in a pinch…I’ll protect you. Rest assured.”

According to what we were told by Connect (Communications Division) through our headsets, the Butei High school bus was an Isuzu Erga Mio. It started driving erratically after leaving the men’s dormitory where Muto and the others got onboard and hadn’t made any stops at any other bus stop since then. At that point, there was an emergency call from the students inside the bus notifying us about the bus-jacking. The bus, carrying sixty students and exceeding its capacity for passengers, circled around Academy Island once and was heading towards Odaiba via the bridge in South Aomi.

“The Metropolitan Police Department and Tokyo Bureau of Butei haven’t taken action?” Surrounded by the roaring noise of the helicopter as it increased in altitude, I spoke to Aria through the headsets.

“They have. But our target is a moving bus. There’s a certain amount of preparation required.”

“So we're the first ones to tackle this head on.”

“Of course. I caught onto the culprit’s radio frequency and made preparations before a report was made.”

Aria gave a snort and did an inspection of the two pistols she always used. As far as I could see, her gray and black pistols only differed in color and were of the same make. They appeared to be custom made guns with a Colt Government as their base. It was the trademark gun of Colt’s Manufacturing Company, and all of the various patents had run out on it, so it was fairly easy to customize them as one pleased. What particularly stood out was the conch cameo attached to the grip, which was embossed with the profile of a beautiful woman that vaguely resembled Aria.

“It’s in view.”

Hearing Reki’s voice, both Aria and I brought our faces to the bulletproof window. Looking out the window on the right, I could see the buildings and costal road of Odaiba and the Rinkai Railroad. But at this distance the cars were too small and I couldn’t make them out.

“I don’t see anything, Reki.”

“It’s the bus making a right in front of Hotel Nikko. I can see the Butei High students behind the window.

“I-I’m surprised you can see all that. What’s your eyesight vision?” asked Aria.

“Both my left and right eye have 20/3.3 vision.”

Aria and I looked at each other in shock as Reki nonchalantly replied with an unbelievable numerical figure. The helicopter pilot descended to the location Reki had mentioned, and there in fact was the Butei High school bus speeding along. It was traveling fast—remarkably fast. The bus was overtaking one car after another as it raced by the television station. I could see people flooding out of the station with their cameras and cell phones taking pictures of us as we chased after the bus.

“We're going to transfer to the roof of the bus from mid-air. I’m going to check the exterior of the bus. Kinji, you go inside and contact me after assessing the situation. Reki, standby inside the helicopter and keep following the bus.”

Aria quickly and efficiently gave her instructions and began to remove a backpack containing a tactical assault parachute from the ceiling.

“Go inside…? If the culprit is in there, I’d be endangering the hostages.”

“If this is a ‘Butei killing’, the culprit won’t be inside.”

“This might not even be a ‘Butei killing’!”

“If it’s not, just handle the situation as it develops. Knowing you, you should be able to.”

This girl…

Butei are often criticized for it by the public, but we make it a

principle to resolve matters with expedition, so we tend to deal with circumstances by relying on the spontaneous judgments we make in any given situation. But Aria's plan wasn't simply ignoring theory. You could even call it absurd. Basically, she wanted to be the first one on the scene without conferring with anyone else, and instantly settle the matter with overwhelming combat ability. It might be placing too much confidence in the members of this team. *I think I understand why Aria performs a "solo vocal" in every country she goes to*.

Using the tactical assault parachute, Aria and I fell towards the bus at a speed almost no different from free falling and rolled along the roof as we landed. It had been a while since my last parachute jump and I nearly slipped right off the bus. Fortunately, Aria grabbed my arm in time..

"Come on! Be serious now!" yelled Aria in irritation.

"I am! This is me being serious…! At this moment…" I trailed off as I attached the wire in my belt to the roof of the bus so I don't get thrown off.

Aria did the same and rappelled down the rear of the bus. I used a mirror on an extendable rod to check the inside of the bus in case the perpetrator was onboard. The students were jostling inside, but there was no sign of anyone who looked like he or she could be the culprit. I had one of the students open the window and slipped inside after releasing the wire. The students onboard were already in a state of disarray, but when they saw me come inside, they increasingly rose to a clamor. They were all speaking over each other and I couldn't understand what they were telling me.

"Kinji!"

Turning towards the direction of a familiar voice, I found Muto, the guy who said something about seeing me at second period and abandoned me.

"Muto. Not quite second period yet, but it looks like we meet again."

"Y-Yeah. Damn it. Why did I have to get on this bus?"

"Punishment for abandoning a friend, wouldn't you say?"

"Kenji, that girl over there."

The girl Muto pointed to was wearing glasses and standing next to the driver's seat.

"T-T-T-Tohyama! Help us!"

Her eyes were filled with tears. If I recall, she was from the middle school.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

"I-I-I don't know when, but my cell phone was replaced with a different one. It suddenly started talking…"

"If you reduce speed, the bomb will freaking explode."

So that's how it is.

The same person was probably behind this, just like Aria said. The culprit

was the same person who hijacked my bicycle!

"Kinji, what's going on?! Give me a status report!"

It was Aria's voice.

"It's just like you said. The bus is being operated remotely. Did you find anything?"

"There's something here that looks like a bomb!"

I extended my neck to look over the heads of the other students, and outside the rear window, I could see a wire and Aria's legs. She was hanging upside down looking underneath the bus.

"Kaczynski Beta type Composition C-4. It's the 'Butei killer's' specialty. From what I can see…the bursting charges have a volume of thirty-five hundred cubic centimeters!"

I thought I was going to faint.

What the hell? "Excessive" doesn't even begin to describe that amount of fire-power. If something like that were to explode, not just a bus but even an entire train would be airborne.

"I'm gonna go underneath and try to dismantle it…ah!"

The exact moment Aria cried out, the bus received a powerful jolt. Losing their balance, the students fell over one another and screams filled the air. In a panic, I looked towards the rear window to see a convertible that had collided into the bus from behind and was now backing away, distancing itself from us.

"Aria, are you okay?!"

No response. That collision seemed to have taken her out. I stuck the upper half of by body out the window so I could climb onto the roof and make my way to the back of the bus. The sound of an engine accelerating made me turn around. The car that should have been behind us—a dark red Renault Sport Spider—had pulled up alongside the bus. In its empty driver's seat was an Uzi placed on top of a barbette and it was aimed in this direction.

"Everyone, get down!" I yelled, warning the students in the bus, and right after they lowered their heads…

Bratatatatat!!

A countless number of bullets decimated the windows of the bus from the rear to the front in one fell swoop. I took a bullet to the chest as well and was sent hurtling back into the bus. Thanks to the bulletproof vest, I wasn't injured, but the impact was like getting hit by a flying knee strike. It was a sensation I just couldn't get used to no matter how many times I experienced it. The bus shook in a somewhat awkward manner so I looked towards the driver's seat.

"!"

The driver was collapsed on top of the steering wheel. He had a bullet wound in his shoulder. Most likely, he wasn't able to get down because he was driving. The bus was starting to veer heavily into the opposite lane. A car coming towards us from ahead managed to avoid

the bus, but collided into the guardrail, sending sparks into the air.

Things are getting really out of hand! What should I do? I don't know. I just don't know! In my current state, I don't know how I can bring this situation under control!

"Freaking turn right at Ariake Coliseum."

I heard the Vocaloid's synthetic voice come from the cell phone that the girl dropped when she fell. To make things worse, the bus was starting to lose speed!

"M-Muto! Take over for the driver! Don't let the bus slow down!"

After taking off my bulletproof helmet and throwing it to Muto, I put my hand on the window once again.

"T-That's no problem, but…" Muto put on the helmet as soon as he caught it and with the help of some other students, laid the injured driver on the floor before taking his place in the driver seat. "The other day, they found out my car was customized. I can't have any more violations on my record!"

Turning my back on Muto, who sounded rather desperate, I proceed to climb onto the roof of the bus.

"This bus is already in violation of driving in the passing lane. Isn't that great, Muto? Your license is officially revoked."

"I hope you fall! I'll run you over while I'm at it!"

Speeding in the heavy rain, the bus made its way onto Rainbow Bridge.

"Does the culprit plan on bringing this explosive into the city?!"

With half of my body outside of the bus, I did my best to keep from getting thrown off. As the bus took the sharp curve near the entrance to the bridge, it tilted to the right, and for an instant, the wheels on the left side of the bus lost contact with the ground, but it managed to make the turn. Muto had instructed everyone to gather on the left side of the bus, doing a good job of maintaining its center of gravity and keeping it from tipping over. That was Muto for you. Just what you'd expect from an honor student of Logi. As the bus raced down Rainbow Bridge, there wasn't a single car to be seen. It looked like the Metropolitan Police Department had taken precautionary measures. The road was blocked off.

"Hey, Aria, are you okay?!" I yelled out from on top of the bus.

"Kinji!" Aria came climbing up her wire from behind the bus and looked up at me.

"Aria! Where's your helmet?!"

"It broke apart when that Renault rammed into the bus! Where's *your* helmet?!" Aria pointed at my head.

"The driver was wounded! I lent my helmet to Muto and had him drive!"

"It's too dangerous! Why did you come out here defenseless?! How could you make such an faulty judgment call like that?! Hurry up and

get back in the—Behind you! Get down! What are you doing, you idiot?!"

Aria's face went pale as she suddenly drew her two pistols and charged at me.

What happened?

Unable to grasp the situation, I turned around and looked behind me. What I saw was the Renault Sport Spider, which had taken up position at the front of the bus, opening fire…with the Uzi pointed at my face. Bullets came flying towards me.

I'm a dead man.

That's what I honestly believed. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. While returning fire at the Renault, Aria ran up and tackled me with that small body of hers. The sound of bullets ripping through flesh resonated twice, and fresh blood flew into my line of sight. I didn't feel any pain, however.

"Aria!"

Aria rolled on the roof and off the side of the bus. She left behind a trail of blood that was washed away by the rain.

"Aria! Ariaaaaa!"

I pulled on Aria's wire with every ounce of strength I had. The Renault reduced its speed and fell back to the side of the bus.

Not good. If that thing opens fire at us now, it's all over!

That's what I was thinking to myself but…the Uzi remained silent. Upon taking a closer look, I saw that the barbette was broken. In that brief exchange of fire, Aria had destroyed the Renault's weaponry.

If you get in a pinch, I'll protect you.

Aria's anime voice repeated itself in my head.

"Ariaaaaaa!!"

Screaming at the top my lungs, I hauled Aria, who was utterly motionless, up onto the roof of the bus. I felt the blood freeze in my veins when I saw her up close, and at that moment…

Pow!

The sound of something bursting filled the air.

Pow!

There it was again.

"?!"

The sounds were followed by the Renault rapidly spinning out of control and crashing into the guardrail. The bus left the Renault behind in the distance as it exploded and burst into flames. I looked ahead and saw the Butei High helicopter flying parallel with us off the side of Rainbow Bridge. Its hatch was wide open, and I could see Reki on one knee pointing a sniper rifle in our direction. There were many buildings situated in Odaiba, which prevented any possibility of sniping, but here on this large bridge, it was now a valid option.

“…I am a single bullet.”

I heard Reki's voice through the headset. Looking more carefully at her, I noticed that she was aiming at the bus.

"A bullet possesses no human heart. Therefore, I do not think…"

She was whispering to herself what seemed to be a verse of poetry.

"…I merely fly towards my target, nothing more."

I had heard this a few times before at Assault. Reki had a habit of reciting those lines when she was about to fire at her target. The second she finished her incantation… Blam, blam, blam!

The muzzle of her gun flashed three times. With each flash came the impact of a bullet on the bus, and each of the three sounds was followed by the lagging sound of a gunshot.

Clunk, clunk, clunk!

I heard the sound of some component falling off from underneath the bus and rolling down the street behind us. It was the bomb as well as the parts that were connecting it to the bus.

"…I am a single bullet…"

Reki's voice was followed by another gunshot.

Bang!

Sparks arose from the parts the bomb were attached to, and the entire unit soared through the air like a soccer ball. It then made its way to the median strip and from there, continued on its path to the ocean below.

Booooooom!

I wasn't sure if the bomb had been triggered remotely or not, but a huge column of water rose from the ocean's surface. The bus slowly reduced speed…and came to a stop. On the roof of the bus, Aria who was deathly still…and I, who was unable to be of any use to the bitter end, continued to be pelted by the pouring rain.

Aria was admitted to the Butei Hospital where she was treated for minor wounds. We were lucky. That's all there was to it. The two bullets that hit Aria only grazed her forehead and didn't result in serious injury. Aria went through an MRI scan while she was suffering from a concussion, but there was no cerebral hemorrhage, so she had escaped with only external injuries.

The next day, after turning in a report to the educational affairs department, I went to the Butei Hospital to find Aria in a private VIP hospital room. *Riko did mention that Aria was the daughter of a noble family or something like that.*

Inside her hospital room was a small private room decorated with white lilies. Sticking out from between the flowers was a card that read "From Reki."

That robot-girl brought these with her? That's surprising.

I suddenly heard an odd sound coming from behind the door to her bedroom, which was just slightly opened. I found it suspicious and peeked inside to see Aria sitting up in a huge bed.

She was holding onto a hand mirror and looking at the wound on her forehead.

"…"

She must have been concentrating awfully hard because she wasn't aware of my presence. The swelling on her forehead still hadn't receded, and a deep red lump was bulging out. The bullets had left two intersecting linear scars on her head, ruining the well-shaped forehead she always so proudly showed off. I heard from the doctor yesterday that there was nothing they could do about the scars and that they would be permanent—scars that would remain with her for the rest of her life.

I heard that strange noise again. Aria was looking at the mirror with moist eyes, and she was repeatedly fastening and taking off the hairpin she always used. Seeing that, I felt a pain in my heart as if it were being pierced by dozens of needles. Aria…was very fond of her forehead. It must have been really difficult for her to have a scar like that on it.

"…Aria." I pretended like I had just arrived and knocked on the door after slightly distancing myself from it.

"Ah, h-hold on a second."

I could hear the rustling sound of hasty movement coming from inside the room.

"…Come in."

I entered the room just in time to see Aria rewrap the bandage around her head with amazing speed and proceed to tinker with her gun using some sort of tool. It was a bit contrived, but apparently she was pretending to have been doing maintenance on her gun.

"Are you here to visit me?" When she glanced at me, there was a look of aversion in her eyes that she wasn't trying to hide.

"Just don't treat me like I'm some sort of injured patient. I can't believe I'm being hospitalized for a little scratch like this. The doctors here make such a big deal out of everything."

"You're every bit an injured patient. That wound on your forehead–"

"What about it? Stop your gawking."

"Well, I mean, it's gonna leave a scar isn't it?"

"So what? I'm not concerned about it. You don't have to be concerned about it, either. That takes care of maintenance." Aria placed her gun on the side table and crossed her arms. "Butei Charter, Article One, 'Believe in your comrades and help one another.' I was merely abiding by our creed. I wasn't making any special exceptions when I saved you just because it was you.

"The Butei Charter…? It's just a bunch of stuck up ideals. Don't go around defending them like some idiot."

"…Are you saying I'm an idiot? I don't wanna hear that from someone like you. But…you may be right. I just might be an idiot for saving an idiot like you."

Aria turned her back on me, and I didn't feel like carrying on this conversation any further so I just held out the bag of goods I brought from the convenience store. After a short silence, Aria's nostrils quivered as she sniffed the air.

"…Peach buns?"

I hadn't even opened the bag, but she knew by the scent. Aria turned towards me and her angry red eyes opened wide.

"Knock yourself out. I bought all they had—five to be precise. They're your favorite, aren't they?"

For a moment, Aria just sat there quietly eyeing the bag, but soon enough she snatched it out of my hands and plunged her own inside. She then began to greedily devour the peach buns, which had already started to cool off. It was kind of like feeding a wounded, savage animal.

"Take your time. Those peach buns aren't going anywhere."

"Be quiet. I can eat them however I want."

Aria stopped eating just long enough to say something spiteful with that bean paste-stained mouth of hers and continued to gobble down her peach buns in silence. Butei Hospital was famous for serving awful tasting food. She probably hadn't eaten too much since she's been here.

"Well, listen while you eat. After that incident, they found the hotel room that the culprit was using."

"…What about the hotel register?"

"There was none. Rather, I should say the records were tampered with. It was done from the outside."

I took out a translucent file from my bag and laid it by Aria's knees. "We had Riko Mine and other members of Inquesta and Repier inspect the room. The end result…not a single trace of anything that would help to identify the culprit could be found."

"I'm not surprised. Our 'Butei killer' is incredibly cunning. There's no way the person would leave behind any footprints."

"'Butei killer', huh? I was convinced that both my bicycle-jacking episode and the bus-jacking were copycat crimes of the 'Butei killings'. After all, the perpetrator had already been arrested."

"I told you. They arrested the wrong person."

I was unable to refute Aria's theory. Sure enough, these crimes didn't seem like the work of some petty copycat criminal.

"Also…the results of the investigation on the bicycle-jacking are included in that file. But to be honest, there wasn't much to gain from that incident, either. Both the Segways and the Uzis were stolen goods."

"Those guys are all so useless. Reading those documents would be a waste of time."

"If that's what you think, just throw them in the trash."

I wasn't really being serious, but then Aria actually did just that, causing me to become a little angry. Although they didn't come up with any clues, Riko and the others worked throughout the night conducting

the investigation.

"You can leave now. It's over isn't it?"

"?"

"You were going to help resolve the first case that presented itself after returning to Assault. That case is closed so your contract has expired. You can go back to Inquesta now. Good-Bye." Aria had finished her peach buns and spoke with exasperation.

"What the hell? You really are a self-centered person, aren't you? You were so forceful in dragging me into this, and now that you're done with me, that's how you're gonna be?"

"Do you want me to apologize? Will you feel better if I pay you?"

"…Do you want to make me angry?"

"I want you to hurry up and leave. Let me be alone."

"You got it. I'm outta here."

I could feel myself getting angrier by the minute. I wasn't sure why I was so upset, but each of Aria's words stung me like bees.

"Humph!" I turned my back on Aria as well and started heading out of the hospital room.

"I can't believe you…"

I heard Aria say something under her breath as I took hold of the doorknob.

"I was counting on you…I thought you would show me the skills you demonstrated that other time if I brought you on a mission with me!"

"Nobody told you to have such big expectations of me! You came to your own conclusions! I don't have that kind of skill! And besides…I've already decided to quit being a Butei! Why do you always decide everything on your own?!"

Unable to control myself, I raised my voice as I spun around to face her. For some reason, when Aria was the person I was dealing with, I couldn't maintain my composure.

Damn it. What's going on? This isn't like me.

"I have to decide everything on my own! I'm running out of time!"

"What's that supposed to mean?! You're not making any sense!"

"If you're a Butei, why don't you look into it on your own?! Compared to…compared to my circumstances, your reasons for wanting to quit being a Butei are trivial! I just know it!"

Trivial.

Hearing those words, before I knew it, I had impulsively approached Aria, and forgetting that she was a girl, I nearly grabbed her by the collar. However, I restrained myself, and my fists closed on themselves instead—tightly enough to leave nail imprints on my hand.

"W-What? What's *your* problem?"

Even Aria was taken off guard by the threatening attitude I had never shown before. I placed both of my hands on the bed and buried my face in the sheets.

I must have a hideous look on my face right now—a face I don't want to show to anyone.

Shirayuki had mentioned this to me before, but my family, the Tohyama's, have been heroes of justice for generations. The occupation may have changed depending on the era, but for hundreds of years, we have been fighting on behalf of the weak using the power of our unique genetic make-up known as hysteria mode. My father, who died in the line of duty while I was still a toddler, was active as an armed prosecutor, and my older brother was also a Butei. As far as I was concerned, they were heroes I wanted to model my own life after. That's why I entered Butei High of my own free will without hesitation. My hysteria mode might have been the cause of some bad experiences I had in middle school, but I figured I would eventually be able to control it like my father and my older brother. That's how optimistic I was. But during the winter of last year, something happened that turned my entire life upside down—the boating disaster off the coast of Uraga.

Embellir, a Japanese-registered cruise ship, had sunk, and one passenger went missing. It was a misfortunate accident in which the search was called off without the body ever turning up. The person who died was a Butei who happened to be on the boat—Kinichi Tohyama, my older brother. According to what the police said, my brother, a person who was always fighting on behalf of the weak for a mere pittance and never lost to even the most formidable of villains, was helping to evacuate the crew and passengers and failed to make it out in time as a result. But fearing lawsuits from passengers, the company that offered the cruise as well as some of the passengers who were incited by the company, harshly criticized my brother after the accident. They claimed that my brother was an incompetent Butei for not being able to prevent the accident, despite being onboard the ship. All the numerous verbal attacks posted on the Internet and in the weekly magazines that were aimed at me, the surviving family—even now, they still haunt me in my dreams. *Why did my brother die after saving other people? Why was he made into a scapegoat? It's because of the hysteria mode in our genes… and it's because he was a damned Butei! That's right. Butei. Heroes of justice. They just fight and fight until they're completely battered, and even if they wind up dead, people will still throw stones at them. They're worthless roles, and whoever fills them is only going to lose out! That's why I gave up becoming something so ridiculous. From this point on, I'm going to be a regular person. I'm joining the side that just lives their lives saying irresponsible things and spends their days carefree and in peace. That's what I've decided.*

I lifted my head. Aria…wasn't saying a word. When my eyes met with those camellia-colored eyes of hers, I realized what this black feeling inside me that I had towards Aria was. She and I were alike. Aria shouldered a heavy burden that no one else could understand and was

tragically running at full speed down the path of a Butei in the direction directly opposite of where I was headed. I was trying to run away from my issues, while she was trying to confront hers. That's why I was unable to remain calm when Aria was involved.

"In any case, I've already given up on being a Butei. Starting next year, I'll even be going to a normal school."

"…"

"Are you listening?"

"Alright…alright already…You…" Aria looked away from me and closed her eyes for short while before reopening them. It was like placing the period at the end of a sentence that shouldn't be written. "… weren't the person I was looking for."

Fourth Bullet Under the Bangs

In the end, Aria and I parted from each other on disagreeable terms.

I wonder if this was really for the best.

It was precisely the outcome I had always wished for. I was able to show her that I couldn't do anything in my current state thanks to that bus-jacking incident. Thus, Aria became disillusioned and set me free. As a result, I could now leave Assault. All I had to do now was peacefully bide my time at Inquesta and transfer to a regular school next year. Then I could wash my hands of this Butei lifestyle and become an ordinary adult. What's wrong with that?

But what is it—this feeling that's eating at me?

Presently, I was spending the weekend with emotions that caused me boundless irritation. I couldn't make any sense of them and they had lingered with me since leaving the hospital. Whether I was watching television or surfing the net, the sound of that hairpin opening and closing just wouldn't leave from my head. I had heard that Aria was due to be released from the hospital on Sunday morning—this morning—and busied myself with cleaning and laundry so as not to think about her. But it was because of this…that I coincidentally caught sight of Aria in an unexpected place after she was discharged. It was at a beauty salon in the corner of Academy Island. The dry cleaners I had gone to happened to be next to the salon, and on my way home, I was so shocked to see Aria in her transformed state that I stopped dead in my tracks. She didn't realize I was there, so it was somewhat like I was spying on her again, but…

"…"

Aria, looking a little down, still had her hair in twin pigtails, but her hairstyle was slightly different. She had bangs. She looked amazingly cute with them, really…but there was no questioning why they were there. They were for concealing the scar on her forehead. When that thought entered my head, my heart was again filled with a sharp prickling sensation. Making clip-clop noises with her sandals, decorated with puff balls which were the color of Rainier cherries, Aria walked towards the monorail station. She was dressed in her casual clothes. Since I had only ever seen Aria in her school uniform or class C equipment, seeing her look like any other girl was actually quite

different. Wearing a simple, neat, white dress adorned with a light pink pattern, Aria had a modern look about her that made it seem as if she stepped right out of a fashion magazine. If a picture of her were put on the cover, both the magazine and the dress would probably sell like hotcakes. True, Aria was the type who always took care to make sure she had a respectable appearance, but it was the first time I had ever seen her this dressed up.

I wonder where she's going. On a date? There's no need for the interrogative case. That's probably it. Aria's boyfriend… She had one? I wonder what he's like.

With those thoughts in my mind, I wasn't really sure why…but I just started following her. Aria took the monorail to Shinbashi, and from there, going through Kanda via train, got off at Shinjuku. Following Aria from a short distance, I noticed that the guys in the city were eying her. It made sense. You'd be lucky to find a girl this cute. Not only that, but she put her all into dressing herself up nicely. It would've been odd if guys *weren't* looking at her. Aria left the station through the west exit and emerged into the skyscraper-dominated city, her sandals incessantly clip-clopped every step of the way. The direction she was heading in also had me tilting my head. There was nothing here except for office buildings. Did that mean her boyfriend was a company employee? I continued to follow Aria, and she eventually stopped in front of one the most unexpected buildings. It was the Shinjuku Police Department. *Why did she get all dress up to come to a place like this?*

"…You stink at tailing people. I can see you as plain as day," said Aria without even turning around to look at me.

I swallowed hard, despite myself.

Well, well. She knew.

"Um…well, you said it yourself. 'If you're a Butei don't ask questions. Investigate on your own.'" I felt awkward so I replied with a somewhat defiant attitude as I walked over to Aria's side. "More to the point, if you knew I was there, why didn't you say anything?"

"I couldn't make up my mind whether or not I wanted to let you know about this…what with you being a victim of the 'Butei killer' and all."

"?"

"Well, we're here now. You plan on coming along even if I tried to send you away, aren't you?" said Aria, lacking her usual stubborn spirit.

Aria entered the police department, and my mind was filled with puzzling thoughts as I followed behind her.

I recognized the beautiful woman who came into the visiting room for detainees on the other side of the acrylic glass window under the supervision of two guards.

If I recall…I saw her on the cameo embedded on the grip of Aria's pistol. She was the lady who was engraved on that cameo and looked

like Aria. Her long hair arced in a gentle curve and she had eyes like onyx. Her white porcelain skin was the same as Aria's.

"Oh, my…Aria, is this young gentleman your boyfriend?"

"N-No, he's not, mama."

This lady who looked at me with a hint of surprise on her face, but spoke with a gentle and composed voice—she was Aria's mother. Or so it would seem.

S-She's so young. She seems more like an older sister of Aria rather than her mother.

"He's a dear friend of yours then? How about that! You've gotten to the age at where you have male friends. And you used to be so bad at making any friends at all," Aria's mother chuckled.

"That's not it. This is Kinji Tohyama. He's a student at Butei High, not…what you're thinking. Not by any means," Aria declared positively in front of her mother who was smiling gently.

You don't have to deny it that flatly.

"…It's nice to meet you, Kinji. My name is Kanae Kanzaki. I'm Aria's mother. It would seem you've been helping out my daughter."

"Oh, no, I haven't really…"

Kanae seemed like the type of person who gave the atmosphere a pleasant feeling, despite being in a room such as the one we were in. Truth be told, I have a weakness for people like this. Quite unlike me, I became flustered and was unable to speak very smoothly. Seeing me like that seemed to put a look of irritation on Aria's face, and she leaned forward towards the acrylic glass.

"Mama, we're only allowed to speak for three minutes so I'll make this quick…this guy with the dumb look on his face is the third victim of the 'Butei killings.' Last week, a bomb was planted on his bicycle at school."

"…Oh dear…" said Kanae, hardening her expression.

"One more incident occurred. The day before yesterday, there was a bus-jacking. The 'Butei killer' is suddenly becoming more and more active. That means whoever is behind this is going to reveal himself before long. So first, I'm going to catch the 'Butei killer' just like I planned. If I can prove your innocence in regards to the 'Butei killings' alone, I can reduce your sentence of eight hundred and sixty-four years to seven hundred and forty-two. I'll do something about all the other accusations before the Supreme Court trial too. I swear."

My eyes nearly popped out of my head when I heard what Aria just said.

"Then I'm going capture all those members of IU who made a scapegoat out of you and throw them in here."

"Aria, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but it's still too early for you to take on IU. …Have you found a partner?"

"I…just can't find one. No one can keep up with me…" "That won't

do, Aria. Your gifts are hereditary. But you've also inherited the less desirable traits of our family—your excessive pride and childish personality. At this rate, you won't even be able to make use of half of your abilities. What you need is a partner who understands you and can serve as an intermediary connecting you to the rest of the world. A suitable partner will help to draw out your powers, increasing your abilities a thousand-fold. Your great-grandfather and grandmother also had outstanding partners, didn't they?"

"…I've heard enough about that in London to make me sick. I'm called defective because after all this time, I still can't find a partner… but…"

"Take your time and walk slowly through life. Children who run too fast wind up falling down," said Kanae slowly blinking her eyes, which had long eyelashes attached to them.

"Kanzaki. It's time," announced the guard standing next to the door while he looked at the clock hanging on the wall.

"Mama, just you wait. I *will* catch all the real culprits before the trial."

"You mustn't be too hasty, Aria. I'm worried about you. Don't go running off on your own."

"I have to! I want to get you out of here as soon as possible!"

"Aria, my lawyer worked hard to push back the date of the Supreme Court trial, so I want you to calm down and find a partner before anything else. That wound on your forehead is proof that you're rushing into dangerous situations that you're not capable of handling by yourself."

Kanae scolded Aria for the injury that she had tried her best to hide, along with the bandages, under her bangs.

"I can't! I can't! I can't!"

"Aria…!"

"It's time!"

Kanae leaned towards the acrylic glass window trying to soothe Aria who had become quite agitated, but the guard put her in a full nelson and dragged her away. "Ah!" Kanae groaned slightly.

"Stop it! Don't be so rough with her!"

Aria snarled her tooth like a small wild animal and her camellia-colored eyes were furious as she pounced at the acrylic window. The glass may have been transparent, but it was also thick and solid. Naturally, it didn't give in to Aria, nor did it even budge. Kanae could only watch Aria with a look of uneasiness as the two guards dragged her out of the room. The door to the visiting room closed with a heavy, metallic thud that contradicted its soft cream-color.

"I'm gonna sue them. There's no way treating people like that should be allowed. I'm gonna sue…for sure."

The entire time, I couldn't bring myself to speak to Aria as she

muttered to herself while heading back to Shinjuku Station under a cloud filled sky. I merely followed behind her like a shadow.

"…"

Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.

Walking as noisily as ever, Aria made it back to the Alta Shopping Center where she suddenly…

Clip-

…came to a halt. I stopped as well. From behind, I could see Aria droop her head, tense her shoulders in anger, and clench her fists so tightly that they trembled along with her arms, which were pointed straight down.

Drip. Drip…drip.

A few drops of water fell at her feet creating small blotches on the ground. There was no need to check. They were undoubtedly her tears.

"Aria…"

"I'm *not* crying," said Aria in an angry voice, trembling and with her head still facing downward. Surrounded by humid winds, we were subject to the smirks of passersby as we stood there in the center of the sidewalk. They were probably assuming we were a couple in the middle of a fight.

"Hey…Aria."

I walked in front of Aria and stooped down a little, peering into her face.

Drip…drip. Drip.

From eyes hidden behind her bangs, pearl-like droplets ran down Aria's inclined cheeks.

"I-I'm not cry–" Aria grit her teeth, and the tears flowed freely from her eyes, which she firmly held closed.

And then…

"…not cry…i..ng…! Waaaaaaaaaaah!"

The last thread holding her together snapped and she wept openly. Refusing to show me her face, Aria tilted her head all the way back and simply cried like a child. She wailed so loudly, it felt as if my heart were vibrating in response to the sound waves.

"Waaaaaaaaaaah…mamaaa…mamaaaaaaa…!"

Evening befell the city as it advertised trendy clothing and the latest electronic gizmos with its dazzling neon sign lights and up-beat music. Those flashing lights seemed to be playing with Aria's peach-colored hair, the way they illuminated her head. And then, as if to add insult to injury, we were caught in a sudden shower. Both people and cars continued to pass by us, one after another, as we stood there in the rain.

A girl holding a cell phone to her ear noisily passed by saying,

“Hahaha! Seriously?! That’s so funny!” I was powerless to comfort Aria, whose incessant crying mingled with the hustle and bustle of the city, and just stood by her side in silence.

At the start of the week, Tokyo was being visited by strong winds, and while attending classes for general academic subjects, I noted that the seat to the right of mine was empty. Apparently, Aria wasn’t coming to school today. Yesterday, when Aria finally stopped crying in front of the Alta Shopping Center, she told me that she wanted to be alone, so we parted ways there and hadn’t been in contact with each other since. That day, I followed Aria whom I just happened to come across by chance, acquainted myself with her mother as one of the victims of the “Butei killer”, and learned quite a few things—things I wish I hadn’t learned.

Aria’s mother was being held in custody as a suspect in the “Butei killings” and was already convicted at the appeals court. In all likelihood, the lower court reserved system was being applied. With this new system, in a case where sufficient evidence was presented, the process leading to a Supreme Court hearing could be expedited, preventing any delays to the trial. The sentence awaiting her at the Supreme Court was eight hundred and sixty-four years in prison—basically a life sentence. Looking back on the conversation that took place in the visiting room, there would seem to be other charges Aria’s mother was faced with besides the string of murders that were a result of “Butei killing.” Aria declared that all of them were false charges and was trying to clear her mother of them before the Supreme Court trial. The belligerent means by which she intended to do so was by capturing the true culprits as an official Butei.

There was also mention of a “partner.” Aria’s family, the “H’s”, was of nobility. Evidently, they were a distinguished family of police officers or something to that effect, and they all drastically enhanced their abilities by pairing up with a capable partner, thereby accomplishing all sorts of commendable deeds. This was why Aria, too, was being pressed to find a partner…but she was having difficulty with that. It was no surprise. It would be by no means, an easy task to find a partner who could keep up with a genius like her. Aria might have been using the term “slave” in place of “partner” to lower the standards of the person she was searching for, even if only in title, thus reducing the psychological burden she bore.

Pondering about all of this, my Inquesta class, which I was completely unable to concentrate on, came to an end, and I was alerted by a text message that was sent to my cell phone. It was from Riko.

Kii-kun, when class is over come to Club Estella in Odaiba. I have something important to discuss with you.

Normally, I would have just ignored a message like this. First of all, an invitation from a girl was an invitation to trouble, and Riko’s

"important" discussions have never once actually been important. This time, however, circumstances are a little different. Riko was using the information from last week's bus-jacking to continue her investigation, which was probably the reason she ditched today's Inquesta class. Plus the fact that Aria didn't come to school today was weighing on my mind. Something in my gut told me it would be worth it, so just in case, I got on the monorail to Odaiba.

I got lost a little along the way, but after arriving at Club Estella, I found out that the place was essentially a high-class karaoke box. In the parking lot was a customized shocking pink Vespa.

This horrible taste in colors…I've seen it before. This belongs to Riko.

On the surface, it looked like it had a 50 cc engine, but Riko had been boasting of how she paid Muto to remodel the Vespa to the point where it just barely passed automobile inspection, and now it could reach speeds of one hundred and fifty kilometers per hour.

Muto…you really need to be more discriminating about what jobs you take.

The time was six in the evening. The sky at sunset was so distinctly red that it resembled blood, and scattered clouds of navy blue were drifting along in it at an unusually fast rate. It was most likely an effect of the typhoon approaching Tokyo. The wind was quite strong. I entered the club and stepped into a bar lounge where there were female office workers on their way home from work and couples on a date picking at cakes that were like works of art. Looking around, I noticed some female students from Butei High here and there.

This place is pretty popular, isn't it?

"Kiiii-kuuuunnn!"

Riko trotted her way towards me wearing a Lolita school uniform, as always. The one she had on today was really something. In particular, the skirt was bulging with frills like a carnation. The bulges were probably created by an underskirt called a pannier.

"Really now, Riko. What are you doing skipping class and coming to a place like this?"

"Hee hee. I was dressing up in this, my Sunday best. But you took so long in getting here I thought I'd been stood up. I'm so glad you made it."

"We're not in the kind of relationship in which one of us can do any 'standing up' or be 'stood up.'"

"Oh, you're being so cold. You're about to head down the 'Riko route', you know?

"Say what? You make absolutely no sense."

The upward glance she was giving me was oddly seductive, and I clicked my tongue.

Maybe I shouldn't have come after all. What's with this girl?

Riko latched onto my arm as if she was trying to hang down from it,

and we went further into the establishment, with Riko in high spirits. Seeing this, the other girls from Butei High began whispering to each other.

"Oh my gosh. Now Kinji's going out with Riko?"

"I wonder if he's into short girls."

"That's probably the case. Don't forget about Hotogi."

Hey, you guys. I can hear you. Stop creating one misunderstanding after the other.

The karaoke room that Riko practically pushed me inside of was a private room for two decorated in an art nouvea style. Riko sat me down on a fluffy couch, and after seating herself right beside me, indicated with a wink the Mont Blanc and black tea on the table.

"I'm the one that called you out here, so everything's on me." Riko gulped down some awfully sweet looking milk tea and looked up at me with her large eyes.

"Aaaah, that hit the spot. Say, Kii-kun, you got in a fight with Aria, didn't you?"

"That's none of *your* business, is it?"

"Sure it is. You and Aria have to get along well with each other."

"Why is that?"

"Because if you don't, it's no fun for me!"

Riko stuck a fork into the Mont Blanc and smiled at me. It was an expression that meant she was telling the truth.

"Kii-kun, say 'Ahh.'" Riko brought the fork with the chunk of cake on it next to my face.

"I don't think so. Stop being so dumb."

"…'Butei killing'…" She said it as if she were pulling out a winning card and my eyes reacted accordingly.

"…Did you…find something out?"

"I'll tell you if you say 'Ahh.'"

It was so embarrassing, I almost wanted to die, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I took a bite of the Mont Blanc that Riko offered me and gave her a threatening look with my eyes that said, "Now spill it."

"Hee hee. I found out about this in the files at the Metropolitan Police Department. The thing is, the people who died as a result of 'Butei killings' might not have been just the motorcycle-jacking and the carjacking incident."

"What do you mean?"

"There's something called a 'potential incident'. An incident that was officially categorized as an accident might have actually been caused by the 'Butei killer', but nobody knows because of a cover-up."

"That's possible?"

"I found such a case in the files. I think the person might have been a victim of the 'Butei killer.'"

Riko took out a piece of paper that was folded in four quarters from her poche pocket and slowly unfolded it as if she were performing a magic trick. She then showed me what was written on it.

"!"

It felt like the blood in my veins had frozen solid.

December 24, 2008 Boating disaster off the coast of Uraga

Fatalities: Butei Kinichi Tohyama (nineteen years old)

"This name—it's your brother, isn't it? I'm thinking the boat was hijacked."

Riko's voice sounded like it was coming from far off into the distance.

…The "Butei killer". What are you? Who are you? Why my brother? Why did you target my brother and me?!

"I like it."

Riko's voice was filled with passion, and upon hearing it, I came back to my senses. When I looked her in the eyes, she narrowed them as she gazed at me.

"I like it, Kinji—that look in your eyes. It sends shivers down my spine." Riko brought the upper half of her body closer to me looking as if she were of deriving a sense of ecstasy. "*Je t'aime à croquer*. During the entrance exam, I fell in love with your eyes at first sight."

"…Riko?"

In the course of the exam, I defeated Riko as easily as if she were merely toddler. I wondered if that was what she was referring to.

"Kinji." In that uncomfortably confined room, Riko was demonstrating animal-like movements. Then out of the blue, she grabbed onto me. It was all so sudden that I was helpless to do anything about it and was pushed down into the couch.

"…Riko?!"

"Kinji, you sure are insensitive to love. It's almost like your purposely trying to be insensitive. Say…you do realize, don't you? We're in the middle of an event scene."

My head was being enveloped by Riko's two pigtails as well as the rest of her long hair, which was done in dog tails. Her baby face was so close to mine that there were barely five inches between us. Different from that of Aria's, Riko was giving off a sweet feminine scent like vanilla or almonds. She brought her lips as close to my cheek as possible without actually touching it, and from there, her mouth approached my ear. I'm not sure what her intentions were, but she bit my earlobe. It hurt.

"Say, Kinji. I *did* go through the trouble of getting us this expensive room… It's okay if you do the sort of thing that happens in the games…" said Riko in a passionate and sorrowful voice as she pressed her entire body against mine.

R-Riko. Had Riko always been this seductive?

Some of the guys at Inquesta who were more 'appreciative' of Riko called her the 'busty Lolita face', and with her lying on top of me, I now understood why. She was always dressed up in clothes a little girl would be interested in and had mannerisms of a child, yet the curves in her body were all too well defined, and a very soft body it was at that…

"Kinji, no one will ever find out what takes place in this room. Shirayuki is busy training for SSR, and Aria is going back to England. I heard she'll be taking a charter plane at seven tonight, so she's probably at Haneda airport by now. So…how about doing something fun with me? Hee hee."

It was in part because Riko's seductiveness was so sudden, but also because her advances were so unexpected, I didn't have a chance to mentally prepare myself. Before I knew it, the core of my body was heating up and hardening as my blood began to boil. I was in hysteria mode.

"…!"

At that instant, something sparked inside my head. What Riko had just told me and the boating incident that happened in the past melded into a single line, as if they had been brought together with an electromagnet. And that line…led to a terrifying ending that could never be changed once it came to be.

This is bad. Real bad. I have to get moving. Now!

"Sorry about this…!"

In hysteria mode, I slipped my hand in front of Riko's face and snapped my finger. The second Riko flinched and blinked her eyes…

"It's about time for good little girls to return home and go to bed, isn't it?"

"Huh?"

I had Riko's small body scooped up in my arms, and turning around I laid her down on the couch. I then stood up and dashed out of the room smoothing my bangs upward. It was my hysteria mode hair style…

Fifth Bullet Olmes

It depended on the type of stimulation I received, but hysteria mode only lasted from around twenty to forty minutes. By the time I had reached terminal two of Haneda Airport, I was already back to normal mode. Even so, I couldn't afford to stop. If my deduction was correct, Aria was about to come face to face with that person. She was about to come face to face with the "Butei killer." With a flash of the badge in my Butei handbook, I bypassed the check-in area as well as the metal detectors and ran through the gate.

Aria. If you want to go back to England, be my guest. But don't engage in combat with the "Butei killer" any more. If the "Butei killer" defeated my brother…you won't be able to beat the "Butei killer" on your own. That's a fact. My brother was strong—stronger than anyone. He was clever too. Even if I were in hysteria mode, I couldn't even begin to compare with him.

Aria…! Next time you won't get off with just a wound to the forehead! You're gonna get killed! You'll die!

I ran down the boarding bridge and as they were closing the hatch, just barely managed to get on ANA flight six hundred, Boeing 737-350 headed for London Heathrow Airport. The hatch made a loud sound as it shut behind me.

"I'm a Butei! Cancel this flight!"

I thrust my Butei badge in the face of a flight attendant with a small build who looked at me with eyes wide open.

"S-Sir, I'm terribly sorry, but what exactly–"

"There's no time to explain! Just see to it that this plane stays grounded!"

Quite startled, the flight attendant nodded her head up and down and hurried up the stairs to the second floor. I wanted to go with her, but fell to my knees instead. Leaving Assault and letting my stamina drop so low had taken its toll on me. I was completely out of breath from sprinting all the way here and didn't feel like I could take another step.

Well…at any rate, I've managed to keep the plane from taking off.

Just as that thought entered my head, I could feel the plane jolt into motion.

It's…moving.

"U-Um…I-I couldn't stop it. T-The pilot said that according to regulations, once we've entered this phase, the flight can't be aborted without orders from air traffic control," said the flight attendant coming down from the second floor and trembling as she looked at me.

"W-What kind of idiot…?!"

"P-Please, don't shoot! First of all, are you really a Butei? The captain screamed at me saying, 'Stop the plane?! We haven't received any instructions like that!'"

What a moron! What should I do? Should I force them to stop the plane even if it means threatening them with my gun? No, that's no good. From what she just told me, it's evident that the captain doesn't trust me. Threatening him at this point probably wouldn't stop the plane.

Looking out the window, I saw that ANA flight six hundred had already entered the runway. *If I forced them to stop now, we'd be running the risk of colliding with another plane on the runway. I gotta think of another way. It's too late to stop the plane. If I've lost the initiative, then I'll just have to fight defensively or we're going to lose. There's no other choice but to change strategies*. The plane had risen into the air and the fasten-seat belt lights disappeared. It was a hassle, but I calmed down the flight attendant and had her guide me to Aria's seat—or rather, private room I should say. The cabin deck structure of this plane was clearly different from that of a regular passenger plane. The first floor was an expansive bar, and on the second floor was a center passageway with doors lined up on the left and right side. I had seen something like this on the news before. It was an ultra-luxurious passenger plane called a "flying resort", and all of its seats were located in suites. In other words, it was a newly designed aircraft patronized by celebrities that didn't have typical seats, but instead was built with twelve private rooms you would find at a first-class hotel, and each room was completely furnished with its own bed, shower room, and other amenities.

"…K-Kinji?!"

Aria opened her crimson eyes wide when she saw me enter her suite decorated with fresh flowers.

Great. For the time being, at least we've managed to meet up with each other.

"…You never cease to amaze me, milady Aria. A one-way ticket like this probably costs around two thousand dollars, no?" I made the comment while admiring the double bed and Aria got out of her seat glaring at me.

"Barging into a person's room without permission? How rude!"

"You have absolutely no right to say something like that, wouldn't you agree?"

Aria must have remembered how she forced her way into my apartment because she held her tongue despite her anger.

"…What did you follow me here for?"

“Why does the sun rise? Why does the moon rise?”

“Oh, shut up! If you don’t answer me, I’m gonna open a hole in you!”

I think Aria was displeased with me using her own line against her, seeing as she placed her hands on the hem of her skirt. I was actually relieved.

Good. She has her weapons with her.

“Butei Charter, Article Two, ‘Fulfill the contract made with your clients at all costs.’”

“…?”

“I promised to work with you to resolve the first case that came up after returning to Assault. That case of the “Butei killer” still hasn’t been resolved.”

“What are you boasting about? You’re just a useless guy who can’t do anything!” Aria howled like a lion cub, bearing her tooth.

“Get out of here! Thanks to you, I know all too well now. I really am suited for an “aria”! There isn’t a person in this entire world who can be my partner! That’s why I’ve decided to continue fighting alone! It doesn’t matter if my opponent is the “Butei killer” or anyone else!”

“…I wish you had said that a little sooner.” I sat down in the other available chair and looked out the window at the city below us as if it actually held my interest.

“…Once we get to London, go straight back to Japan. I can at least get you an economy class ticket in exchange for your severance pay. You don’t have anything to do with me anymore! Be sure you don’t talk to me!”

“I’ve never had anything to do with you.”

“Shut up! I forbid you to speak!”

Amidst strong winds, ANA flight six hundred soared in the skies above Tokyo Bay. Aria, with a miserable look on her face, had her arms and legs crossed as she was sitting in her chair and staring out the window. ‘I might as well be hanged’ is what I was thinking to myself. Whether the destination was London or anywhere else, if I was going to get on a plane, I would be flying regardless. At this point, the only thing left to do was wait for the enemy to make the first move.

“This is your captain speaking. I want to apologize to our guests, but in order to avoid turbulence from the typhoon, the plane will be making a detour, so our flight is estimated to be around thirty minutes late.”

The captain finished his announcement and the plane shook slightly as it resumed its flight. The shaking itself wasn’t such a big deal…

Crack! Craaack!

The sound of thunder could be heard from the comparatively nearby thundercloud.

Craaaaaack!!

A particularly loud thunder strike resonated, causing Aria’s eyes to open wide as she ducked her head.

“Scared?”

“O-Of course I’m not scared. Don’t be dumb. More importantly, don’t talk to me. Hearing your voice is irritating to no end.”

Another loud boom echoed as soon as she finished speaking.

“Kyaaa!”

I smiled wryly at seeing Aria yelp out.

Well, well. There’s something that even Miss Aria the Quadra can’t handle. Who would’ve thought it’d be thunder.

“If you’re so afraid of thunder, crawl under the sheets and tremble all you want.”

“S-Shut up, you.”

“It's gonna be a big mess if you wet yourself.”

“Y-Y-You’re an idiot!”

Craaaaaack!!

“Uwah!”

It had finally reached to the point where the deafening sound of thunder caused Aria to jump right up out of her seat. And then she really did crawl under the covers of her bed. The situation developed so identically to the way I had imagined that I couldn’t help but laugh, ignoring the dire circumstances.

It’s possible she actually wet herself.

“Aria, do you have a change of underwear?”

“K-Kinji, you’re such an idiot! I-I’m gonna open a hole in you later!”

Whoa. She’s seriously shuddering like crazy.

Craaaaaaack!! Craaaaaack!!

I’m not sure if it was just bad luck or if the captain wasn’t a very good pilot, but this plane was flying right next to a thundercloud.

“…K-Kinji～～～…”

From underneath the blankets, Aria called out to me in a tearful voice and grabbed a hold of my sleeve while I was sitting next to her.

“C-Come on. You don’t have to be that scared. Here, I’ll turn on the television.”

I shrank back a little from Aria, who was tenaciously hanging onto my sleeve like a child, and flipped through the channels after turning on the television with the remote. Recent movies and anime flashed by. I left the channel on a historical drama that was probably included for the more elderly passengers.

“Don’t claim to have forgotten about me, the great Sakurafubiki! I won’t stand for it!”

Oh…this is a sword-play samurai movie that’s based on one of my ancestors—Kin of Tohyama, a famous magistrate.

According to my brother’s theory, Kin of Tohyama also had the genetic make-up allowing him to go into hysteria mode, and apparently, he was something of an exhibitionist because by stripping himself to the waist, his intellectual and physical abilities would rapidly increase.

“Look. Watch this and take your mind off of it.”

“R-Right.”

It would seem Aria’s rule stating that I couldn’t talk to her had been rescinded. Her trembling hand, which was clinging to my sleeve, was so small and frail… At this moment, I really did think of it as the hand of any normal girl. *If—and this is a big “if”—Aria were just a normal girl right now, I, being just a regular, everyday high school guy…*

“Aria.”

…would bring my hand over her trembling hand…just like this…

“K-Kinji…?”

Sure. As a regular classmate, as a friend, I could at least ease her trembling.

After a few seconds of hesitation, just when Aria’s fingers were about to close on my hand…

Blam! Blam!

…a sound resonated throughout the plane. This time, it wasn’t the sound of thunder, but a sound that we the students of Butei High are more used to hearing—gunshots. Stepping out into the narrow corridor, I found the place to be in utter chaos. Passengers coming out of the twelve rooms and a few flight attendants—a medley of the young, the old, males, and females—were creating a ruckus with anxious looks on their faces. Looking towards the front of the plane where the gunshots came from, I saw that the door to the cockpit was wide open.

“!”

Beside it stood the small-figured idiot of a flight attendant I dealt with earlier. She was dragging the captain and copilot out of the cockpit. I wasn’t sure what happened to them, but they weren’t moving at all. Seeing the attendant cast them aside on the floor of the corridor, I hurriedly drew my gun.

“Freeze!”

Upon hearing me, the flight attendant raised her head and smiled with a face lacking any characteristic features. She then winked at me and went back into the cockpit saying, “Freaking attention please.”

I heard a brief, sharp noise like a pin being drawn, and the flight attendant threw a can at me that she pulled out from inside her blouse. It rolled up next to my feet and a chill ran down my spine.

“Kinji!”

Subduing her fear of thunder, Aria cried out as she came out of the room.

Psssssshhhh!

I could tell from the noise. It was a gas canister. Sarin. Soman. Tabun. Phosgene. Zyklon B. The names of all the poison gases I learned about in Assault raced through my mind. If it were a particularly strong type of gas, this battle was already lost.

“Everyone, get back into your rooms! Shut the doors!” I yelled as I

pushed Aria back into the room.

Just before I closed the door, the plane shook violently. All of the lights went out, and the fearful screams of the passengers could be heard one after another. Before long, the darkness was illuminated by red emergency lamps.

"…Kinji! Are you okay?!"

I looked up at Aria who was showing concern for my well-being and tried taking a deep breath. I was able to breathe. I could see. My limbs weren't paralyzed. I'd been had. Apparently, the gas ejected was harmless.

"Aria. That ridiculous way of speaking…that flight attendant was the "Butei killer". The perp showed up after all."

"…after all…? You knew the "Butei killer" was going to show up…?" Aria looked at me with her camellia-colored eyes wide open.

I decided to tell her about the deduction I made while I was in hysteria mode.

"The 'Butei killer' started off with a motorcycle-jacking and a carjacking. This is something I just learned about recently, but…a certain Butei was also killed in a boat-jacking incident. In that particular case, the Butei probably confronted the 'Butei killer' face to face."

"…Why do you think so?"

"Because the boat-jacking was the only incident you didn't know about. You didn't intercept the radio frequency, right?"

"Y-Yeah."

"The 'Butei killer' wasn't sending out any. In other words, there was no need to control the ship remotely. The culprit was there on the boat in person."

I had always found it odd that my older brother, of all people, "didn't make it out in time".

"But the targeted vehicles—a motorcycle, a car, a boat—which became larger each time, suddenly got smaller. My bicycle. After that was the bus."

"…!"

"Do you get it, Aria? From the very beginning, it was a message. She had you in the palm of her hand from the start. She pinned the guilt on your mother and declared war on you. And now she's planning on having a confrontation with you during this third incident just like she did with my brot…I mean, the Butei who was killed in the boat-jacking. Only this time a plane's been hijacked."

Aria, who wasn't very good at deduction, gritted her teeth in frustration. All of a sudden…

Beep, beep. Beep. Beep, beep, beep.

The fasten-safety belt lights made emergency high-pitched noises as they began flickering erratically.

"…Japanese Morse code…" whispered Aria.

That being the case, I tried my hand at deciphering the flashing lights as I was rocked back and forth in the plane.

Come on over. IU is heaven. Come on over. I'm at the bar on the first floor.

"She's inviting you to come down."

"That's just fine. I'll open a hole in her," said Aria narrowing her eyes in anger and pulling the pistols out from underneath her skirt one right after the other.

"I'll come with you. I'm not sure if I'll be of much help in my current state though."

"I don't need you to come with me."

Craaaaack!

Aria's entire body went stiff as the thundercloud outside made its presence known again.

"Should I come or not?"

"I-If you want to come so badly, I won't stop you."

Following the small guide lights that were installed on the flooring at regular intervals, the two of us cautiously made our way down to the first floor. The first floor was a lavishly decorated bar, and underneath its chandelier, a woman was sitting cross-legged at the counter. It was the flight attendant from earlier.

"!?"

With our pistols pointed at her, both of us knitted our brows. She was wearing a Butei High school uniform. Not only that, but it was a remodeled school uniform trimmed with innumerable frills. Her skirt, bulging outwards like a flower with the help of a pannier, was the same one Riko was wearing at Odaiba.

"You freaking played marvelously into my hands this time as well."

As she said this, the flight attendant tore off the mask-like prosthetic makeup she was wearing over her face. From behind it appeared…

"…Riko?!"

"*Bon soir*."

There was no mistake. The person in front of us who guzzled down a blue cocktail and winked at me was none other than Riko. I was utterly astounded at this bizarre turn of events. Did this mean that after parting with me in Odaiba, she got on that customized Vespa and tracked down this plane just like I did? Did she then dress up like a flight attendant and used her Butei badge to get onboard?

"A person's talents for doing battle with others by utilizing both brain and brawn tend to be inherited, don't they? There are quite a few gifted people at Butei High who inherited their talents like the two of you did. But…your family is special, Olmes."

"…!"

Upon hearing Riko say that word, Aria stiffened up as if an electrical current had passed through her body.

Olmes…? Was that the family name of Aria's British relatives, the "H's"?

"Who…are you exactly?"

Riko smiled at Aria who was furrowing her brow, and the lightning that flashed by the window illuminated her smiling face.

"Riko Mine Lupin the Forth. That's my real name."

…Lupin…? That Lupin? The great French phantom thief who we read about in our Inquesta textbook? Riko is…the great-granddaughter of Arsène Lupin?!

"But…no one in my family ever called me 'Riko'. They wouldn't call me by the cute name my mother gave me. They had a strange way of addressing me."

"Strange…?" whispered Aria.

"Fourth. Fourth. Fourth. Miss Fooourth. Every single one of them… even the damned servants…that's what they called me. Isn't that horrible?"

"W-What of it? What's so bad about "Fourth"?

For some reason, Riko suddenly opened her eyes wide and glared at Aria who posed the question.

"…What *isn't* bad about it?! Am I a number?! Am I nothing but DNA?! I'm Riko! I'm not a number! Damn you all!"

Without warning, Riko went into a rage. She wasn't screaming at us per se, but at somebody else. Her anger wasn't directed at the present situation, but at somewhere else.

What's with this girl?!

"Unless I exceed my great-grandfather, I'll never be able to be myself. I'll just be treated as 'Lupin's great-granddaughter'. That's why I joined IU and obtained this power. Using this power, I'm going to take myself back!"

Aria had a serious look on her face while she was listening to Riko, who wasn't making a bit of sense.

"Wait. Hold on. What are you talking about…?! What is Olmes? What is IU? Were you…really the one behind the 'Butei killings'?!"

"…'Butei killings'? Oh. That was just…" Riko shifted her gaze to Aria. "…a game I was using as a prologue. The person I'm really after is Olmes the Fourth—you, Aria."

Her eyes were no longer the eyes of the Riko I knew. They were the eyes of an animal fixated on its prey.

"One hundred years ago, the battle between our great-grandfathers ended in a draw. In other words, if I can eliminate Olmes the Fourth, I can prove that I've surpassed my great-grandfather. Kinji…be sure to play your part."

The animal-like eyes turned towards me.

"Members of the Olmes family require a partner. Olmes the First, who fought with my great-grandfather, had an excellent partner. That's why I had you hook up with Aria—to keep the conditions the same."

"*You* brought Aria and me together?"

"Yup."

Riko giggled and reverted back to her usual frivolous self.

This girl… The whole "idiot Riko" character was just an act she had been putting on the entire time.

"I planted a bomb on your bicycle and had it send out a reeeally simple radio frequency."

"So you realized I was tracking the radio frequency that the 'Butei killer' used…!"

"Well of course I did. I mean, you were so overtly checking with Connect. But Kinji didn't seem very interested…so I had him cooperate with you during the bus-jacking."

"The bus-jacking too…?!"

"Kinjiii. A Butei should never entrust his watch to somebody else, no matter what the circumstances are. If you keep track of time with an imprecise watch, you'll be late for school."

My watch… So when we were in the greenhouse, she broke it on purpose. Then she offered to repair the watch as an excuse to take it home with her where she tampered with it. As a result, I missed the seven fifty-eight bus that day…

"So…everything went just as you planned, is that it?!"

"Mmm, not exactly. There was one thing that was completely unexpected. I used the bicycle-jacking as a way of getting you two to meet, and I had you team up with each other during the bus-jacking. But I hadn't counted on your unwillingness to stay partners with Aria. I was rather surprised that you didn't take action until I told you about how I took care of your brother."

Kinichi.

"My brother… It was you…?!"

Kinichi. The person I idolized and respected more than anyone. She's the one who killed him…!

I could feel it. I could feel the blood rushing to my head.

This was my weakness. When my brother was involved, I couldn't

keep my cool…!

"Hee hee. Look, Aria. Your partner's upset. Fight alongside him!"

Riko… Just what one would expect from the granddaughter of phantom thief Lupin. I assume this is all going according to plan as well…!

"Kinji, I'll let you in on something special. Guess what? Your brother…he's currently my boyfriend."

"Cut the crap!"

"Kinji! She's trying to provoke us! Calm down!"

"How the hell am I supposed to calm down!?"

I am not going to let you continue to insult my departed brother!

I impulsively tightened the grip in my right hand, which was holding the Beretta, and at that instant, the plane shook violently again.

"!"

"*Oh là là♪*" Before I realized it, the Beretta had disappeared from my hand. The gun made a hollow sound as it broke apart on the floor right behind me. All I could see was the smiling face of Riko who was pointing a small-sized pistol at me—a Walther P99.

"*Non, non*. We can't have that, Kinji. The way you are now, you won't be of any use in a battle. And besides, Olmes' partner isn't the type who participates in fighting. He takes the viewpoint of a regular civilian, giving Olmes hints and drawing out her full potential. Play that role."

Seeing an opening while Riko was busy giving her lecture, Aria made her move. She was like a little lioness. I had just noticed her spring forward when she had her two pistols out homing in on Riko. She must have judged from seeing Riko's weapon that it would work. In close combat between two Butei who always wore bulletproof clothing, a bullet was no longer a weapon that penetrated and killed the opponent in one shot. It became a blunt weapon. That being the case, the total number of bullets in one's possession would determine the outcome. If Riko were hiding an Uzi, which can contain twenty or thirty bullets, underneath that large skirt of hers, Aria would be at a disadvantage. But a Walther 99 normally only held up to sixteen bullets. In comparison, Aria's Government held seven bullets. If you put a bullet in the chamber ahead of time, or inserted one into the ejector, that would make a total of eight. Since she had two pistols, that gave her a total of sixteen shots. It was even.

Or so I thought.

"Aria, you shouldn't assume you're the only one who uses twin pistols." Riko threw aside her cocktail glass and with that hand, pulled out another Walther P99 from underneath her skirt.

"!"

But Aria wasn't in a position to stop now.

Blam, blam blam!

Aria started firing her pistols at Riko from point-blank range.

"Grah! Why you…!"

“Haha! Ahahaha!”

Aria and Riko were competing to hit each other with their bullets, the two of them only inches apart. Butei Charter, Article Nine, “Under no circumstances shall a Butei kill another person while operating as a Butei.” Aria avoided aiming at Riko’s head in order to uphold that law. I’m uncertain if Riko was attempting to fight on the same terms, but she wasn’t aiming at Aria’s head either. Aria’s and Riko’s hands intermingled as if they were in the middle of a fierce martial arts competition. A close-combat gun fight between Butei involved staying out of your opponent’s line of fire, dodging, or using your own arms to knock aside the arms of your opponent.

Bang! Bang, Bang!

The bullets fired from their guns miss their small-bodied targets and instead embed themselves into the walls and the floor.

“Ha!”

Riko laughed aloud when both of Aria’s guns signaled that they were out of ammunition, but at that instant, Aria pinned both of Riko’s arms underneath her armpits. The two of them stood there together as if they were embracing, and Riko’s pistols went silent.

That’s the way! In hand-to-hand combat, the odds look like they’d be in Aria’s favor…!

“Kinji!”

Aria called out to me, but there was no need. Spinning it in my hands, I opened the butterfly knife I kept as a keepsake of my brother. Its blade looked red, glinting under the emergency lamps.

“That’s as far you go, Riko!” I said as I ran towards them, careful to stay clear of the pistols sticking out from behind Aria.

“Quadra… It’s such a coincidence, isn’t it Aria?” said Riko. “You and I are alike in many ways. Our lineage. Our cute looks. And…our nicknames.”

“?”

“I have the same name as you do— ‘Riko the Quadra’. But you know, Aria…”

I stopped in my tracks. Instinctively, it was all I could do, faced with the surreal and eerie scene that spread out before me.

What…is that?!

“…Your ‘Quadra’ isn’t the real thing. You’re still oblivious…to my real power!”

Riko laughed. And as she did so, one of her pigtails was moving—just like the hair of Medusa from Greek mythology. It grabbed onto a knife that Riko had probably hidden on her back and used it to attack Aria.

“!”

Just as shocked as I was, Aria dodged the first strike…but Riko’s other pigtail, which was also armed with a knife, found its target, drawing fresh blood.

“Aaaaagh!” screamed Aria reeling backwards.

She had been cut on the side of her head. Red blood gushed out from the wound.

“Aha…ahaha! Great-grandfather, after one hundred and eight years this much of a difference in ability between descendants can change, can’t it? This girl can’t even use her own powers let alone a partner! I can win! I can win! Today, I can become me! Aha! Ahaha! Ahahahaha!”

Riko laughed as she started to talk unreasonably again, all the while thrusting Aria backwards with her hair. That hair must have been exceptionably powerful because it was startling to see just how easily Aria was knocked back before falling at my feet like a tattered rag.

“Aria…Aria!”

Tightly closing her eyelids against the blood that painted her face dark red, Aria continued to grip the pistols in her hands. Riko licked the blood off the knife being held by her hair with a gratifying look on her face.

Unreal…She’s a monster. What I need to do right now is get Aria out of here.

I could hear Riko laughing at the top of her lungs as I turned my back on her and ran with Aria in my arms.

“Ahahahahaha! Come on, now. Where do you think you’re going to run to in a small plane like this?!”

It had been a while since the last time I held Aria in my arms like a princess—and she was so light, it filled me with grief. When human beings become stiff or struggle about, they feel heavier than they actually are. Aria must have been losing consciousness because she was in a complete state of lethargy. I ran into the suite we had been in previously and laid Aria on the bed. The first thing I did was clean the blood off Aria’s face with one of the towels that the room was supplied with.

“Ngh…..” Aria groaned.

Above her temple was a deep cut underneath her hair.

This is bad. It hit an artery on the side of her head. It’s not as vital as the carotid artery but I’ve got to stop the bleeding right away…!

“Get a grip…the wound isn't that deep!”

Using the hemostatic bandage in my Butei handbook, I sealed the wound on Aria’s head. The bandage was nothing but a temporary form of treatment that used petroleum jelly to forcefully stop the bleeding. I wonder if Aria was aware of that; she smiled listlessly, paying little heed to the lie I told her.

“Aria!”

Half crazed, I stuck my fingers into the penholder of my Butei handbook and pulled out a small hypodermic syringe that had the words ‘Razzo’ written on it.

“I’m gonna use Razzo! You’re not allergic, right?!”

“…n…o…”

Razzo was like a condensed mixture of adrenaline and morphine. Basically, it was a restorative drug that contained both an analeptic and an analgesic. “Razzo is a drug that’s injected directly into the heart. This can’t be helped, okay?”

Having given Aria advanced notice, I climbed on the bed and sat straddling her small body. I then took a hold of the collar of Aria’s sailor uniform.

“I-If you…do…anything..weird…I’ll…blow…”

“Right. Do me a favor and recover to the point of being able to blow a hole in me…!”

I aggressively unzipped and opened up her blouse.

“Uu……” Aria trembled slightly.

That bra decorated with the symbols from a deck of cards was completely exposed. Her skin was like white porcelain. Her breasts were adorable, covered by a single thin cloth. My heart raced with a nearly audible thud. At a time like this…talk about indiscretion.

But damn it, why is every inch of this girl so cute?

*“*Aria…!”

I laid trembling fingers on her white skin. Searching for her sternum, my fingers traveled down her miniature torso. At two fingers length higher, I found her heart. It was right where the front hook of her bra was at.

“K-Kinji…”

“Don’t move.”

“I…I’m scared...”

As she spoke in such a feeble voice, I used my teeth to remove the cap from the syringe I held in my right hand.

“…Aria, can you hear me?! Here it comes!”

She didn’t answer. She didn’t budge. The beating of her heart—it had stopped.

Aria!

“…come back!!”

I thrust the syringe into Aria’s chest as if I were slamming my fist down on top of her. Hesitate and it’s over. That’s why I strengthened my resolve and just injected the medicine into her heart.

“…!”

Aria went into convulsions. Her face twisted in response to the intense power of the drug. But I was happy to see her face even in that condition. It was proof that she was alive. She had been resuscitated.

“Ngh…!”

Aria inhaled deeply through her nose and opened her small mouth in a quiver.

What’s the outcome…?

On the verge of reviving, Aria’s pallid skin began to retrieve its pink

color and, and her respiration gradually became stronger. And then…

"Hwuah!" Aria gasped, and the upper half of her body sprung up like a zombie does in the movies.

"Huh…wha?! W-W-W-W-What the-?! What is this?! M-My breasts?!"

It would seem that due to the medicine, Aria's memory was in disarray, and she was unable to remember a few details.

"Ki-Kinji! You did it again, didn't you?! W-Why do you want to look at my breasts so badly?! Are you trying to make fun of me? Is it because they're small?! They just won't grow, no matter how many years pass! I'm just gonna be one hundred and forty-two centimeters tall for the rest of my life!"

In her confused state, not only Aria's face, but her entire body was as red as a boiled octopus while she was closing her blouse. Soon enough she realized that there was a syringe stuck in her chest.

"Gyaaah!"

She let out a scream unlike anything you'd think you would ever hear from an elegant high school girl and swinging her arm in a wide arc, wildly yanking out the syringe.

"Look at what you're holding! You were taken out by Riko, and I used Razzo to…"

"Riko…Rikoooo!!"

In a frenzy, Aria fixed her clothing and grabbed her two pistols off the bed. She then tried to stagger her way out of the room with the look of a demon on her face.

Not good.

Razzo was a restorative, but at the same time, it was also a stimulant. Aria's physical constitution must have made her particularly susceptible to its effects because she wasn't in her right mind. She wasn't able to judge how much of a difference there was in combat ability between her and Riko.

"Aria, wait! You won't be able to win against her using standard means!" I yelled as I stood blocking the door and grabbed both of her gun-toting hands with my own.

"It doesn't matter! Let…go! You go hide in fear somewhere!" Aria yelled back with her hands grasped by mine and bearing her fang-like tooth.

"Q-Quiet down, Aria! Riko's going to find out that we're in the same room and that we're also not working as a team!"

"I don't care! I'm 'Aria', anyway! I'll take care of Riko by myself! And besides, you didn't need to come here to help in the first place!" A crazed look had surfaced in the red pupils of Aria's eyes, which were glaring at me.

This is not good. It doesn't look like I can get her to calm down.

"You hate me, don't you?! You said it yourself before you went looking for that cat when we were in Oumi! I remember it clearly!"

God, what can I do to shut her up? I've got to seal this mouth that hollers with an anime voice. But there's no way I'm letting go of these hands that are holding onto her guns. The second I do, she'll probably shoot me and run right out of this room. There's got to be some way to… There might be one…

It was a last-resort measure that would take advantage of Aria's weak point. But if I were to go through with it, I…almost without a doubt would go into hysteria mode—that hysteria mode which brought nothing but bad memories and caused my brother's downfall. It would summon forth my other self whom I absolutely didn't want to be and didn't want to show anyone, especially a girl.

But…but…! But right now, there's no other way! At this rate, Riko is going to come straight for us. She might even already be behind the door.

If Riko were to hear us arguing, she would probably reason that she could finish us off easily. And she would be right. Unarmed as I am, naturally I'd be killed, but so would Aria…!

"I remember! You told me, "I absolutely, positively hate you"! I was acting like it didn't bother me when you said that but…I was thinking of you as a potential partner and yet…you told me you hated me! The truth is I was really hurt back then…!"

Aria…forgive me!

"So I don't care anymore! If you hate me, that's fine! Just go ahead and hat–"

I sealed Aria's screaming mouth…

…with my own.

"……!!!"

Aria was so surprised, her camellia-colored eyes seemed like they might pop right out of her head. As I suspected, this midget of girl who didn't know how to handle romantic situations, went completely stiff as a result of the kiss I gave her out of desperation. She didn't just quiet down, her whole body, even the tips of her hands became as rigid as stone.

And this kiss…It was a double-edged sword.

Aria's lips, like the petals of a cherry blossom, were so small and soft… I could feel those lips, slightly warmer than mine, becoming the embers that set my entire body ablaze. My heart thumped loudly. I felt a painfully sharp constricting sensation at the core of my body. It burned like fire, and I could feel something surging up from there that I couldn't hold back.

…Incredible. This is the first time in my life…I've ever experienced such an intense hysteria mode…!

The two of us took a deep breath as our lips parted. It was a rather long kiss since both of us had frozen up.

"Aria…forgive me. There was no other choice."

"…o-o-o-open a h-ho-…" The strength left her legs, and she sank down onto the floor. "K-K-Kinji, you idiot…! What d-do you think you're

doing…at a time like this…?! That…that…that was my f-f-f…first kiss…!"

For a second, I thought she was going to cause another commotion, but it didn't look like that was the case. The tearful voice that was coming from the back of her throat was dull and husky.

"Don't worry. It was mine, too."

"You idiot…! T-Take responsibility…!"

Now in hysteria mode, I knelt down and brought my eyes at the same level as Aria's who had been looking up at me on the verge of crying and shaking like a small animal.

"You got it. I'll take responsibility in any way you'd like. But…first we've got some work to do."

"…Kinji…! This is the second time you…"

Aria seemed to have noticed that my voice was much calmer and deeper than it was previously. She opened her eyes wide with an expression on her face that indicated she had remembered something—most likely the bicycle-jacking incident. I brought my mouth to the side of her head that wasn't injured and whispered into her ear.

"Butei Charter, Article One, 'Believe in your comrades and help one another.' I believe in you, Aria. So believe in me, and use me as a decoy. Listen to me. We're going to work together…and arrest the 'Butei killer.'"

"It's time for the 'bad ending'. Hee hee. Hee hee hee."

Using a key she must have procured from somewhere, Riko opened the door to our suite. She held the door open with her knife wielding hair just as if it were her own hand, and in each of her actual hands, she held a pistol as she smiled at me.

"I figured you two might have killed each other after fighting among yourselves. But that doesn't seem to be the case, so here I am! Ah…"

Did Riko catch on to the fact that I was so calm I could have been mistaken for another person? She truly looked happy as she clapped her guns and knives together.

"Haha! Did you and Aria *do something* together? I'm surprised you could under these circumstances. Hee hee."

Riko… Did she know about it? Did she know about my hysteria mode?

"So? What's going on with Aria? Don't tell me she died," said Riko pointing to the bed with the knife in her hair. There was a lump underneath the blanket consisting of a pillow and sheets that was made to look like a person was lying in the bed.

"Who knows?"

Just very briefly, I looked towards the shower room to the side of me with my eyes, and Riko, observant as she was, followed my gaze.

"Aaaaah…I just love it when you're like that. It makes my heart race. I might lose control and wind up killing you."

"That's the attitude you better have when you come at me. Otherwise

you'll be killed," I said in a warning tone.

Riko had a look of shock on her face as she pointed her gun at me.

"You are the greatest. I just love you to death, Kinji. Come on. Show me what Olmes' partner can do." Riko started to pull the trigger of her gun, and I raised the emergency oxygen cylinder, which I had hidden next to the bed, in front of her vertically.

"…!"

If she were to fire, it would explode. I would be done for, but so would Riko. Realizing this, Riko hesitated for an instant. That instant was all I needed. I threw the cylinder at Riko, and then lunged at her myself. If I could get next to her, I could overwhelm her with the difference in our physiques. The butterfly knife I had hidden made an audible noise as I opened it in the palm of my hand.

"…!"

Riko knit her brows, and at that exact same moment…

"Whoa!"

The plane must have entered an air pocket because it suddenly lurched wildly. I hadn't planned on this sort of bad luck manifesting itself again. It took me by surprise, even in hysteria mode. Losing my footing, I fell on one knee and watched as Riko laughed and pointed her Walther at my forehead in the tilted room. And then…

…!

From the muzzle of her gun, a bullet came speeding towards me. I could see it. *I can't dodge this—not to right or left. There's absolutely no way. If that's the case…!*

Screeeech!

Using my knife, I cut the bullet in two. I was in astonishment myself at the feat. The effects of the hysteria mode I had gone into this time were tremendous. Splitting a bullet in two—to be honest, I was only half way convinced it could be done. I could hear both halves of the bullet driving themselves into the wall behind me to the left and to the right. While Riko was looking at me wide-eyed, a hint of awe mixed with the expression of surprise on her face, I drew the black Government I had borrowed from Aria and pointed it at her.

"Don't move!"

"Shoot me and Aria's dead!" Riko threatened.

She seemed to have judged that, given the position her body was in, she wouldn't have been able to aim the gun at me in time and pointed it toward the shower room. At that moment, the door to the small cabinet next to the ceiling opened, and Aria came rolling out with her silver government in hand.

Blam, blam!

She shot both pistols out of Riko's hands with amazing precision.

"!!"

Then, while still in mid-air, she discarded her gun and pulled out two

Japanese swords from behind her that arced toward Riko like meteors. In that one fluid motion after drawing the swords, she continued to bring them down on Riko's pigtails, severing them from the rest of her hair. The light brown frizzy hair that had been fashioned into pigtails fell to the floor along with the knives.

"Ah...!"

Riko placed her hands on the sides of her head and let out a cry of anxiety for the first time. Aria put away her swords and recovered her pistol in one smooth motion.

"Riko Mine Lupin the Fourth." "You've been caught in the act of attempted murder, and we're placing you under arrest."

I started the sentence and Aria finished it as we simultaneously pointed the black and silver Governments at Riko. Riko looked back and forth between Aria and me with a huge smile on her face.

"I see. You made it seem like she was under the bed and in the shower room, but you were bluffing in both cases. In actuality, you made use of Aria's small size and hid her in the cabinet…Very nice. You can't pull off a double bluff unless you're really in tune with one another."

"It was against my will, but I did live with her for a while. You get in tune even if you don't really want to."

"You two should be proud of yourselves. This is the first time I've ever been pushed this far into a corner."

"We're far beyond pushing you into a corner. It's checkmate."

"You're such a moron," said Riko, her voice dripping with venom.

Riko's hair suddenly began to wriggle about in its entirety. I was late to react to the uncanny scene in front of me. Inside of Riko's hair… something was being operated?

"Stop! What are you doing?!"

I charged at Riko in an attempt to seize her, but at that moment, the plane lurched violently again. It was descending rapidly…! Aria lost her balance and slammed into the wall. It was the best I could do to simply stay on my feet.

"*Buh-bye*" Riko said as she dashed out of the suite with lightning speed.

I *thought* it was odd. This plane reeled in Riko's favor way too often. She probably had a remote control hidden in her hair that she was using to control the plane. ANA flight six hundred was losing altitude at an alarming rate as it descended among the clouds of a typhoon.

What is she planning to do by decreasing the plane's altitude this much?

I raced through the corridor surrounded by the screams of the other passengers and went down the stairs. Riko was standing with her back against a window in the corner of the bar.

"Where do you think you're going to run to in a small plane like this, my little squirrel?" I threw back at Riko the same words she used earlier

as I pointed the Government at her.

"Hee hee. Kinji, I'd advise you not to come any closer than that," Riko smiled, showing off her white teeth. Clay-like objects—most likely bombs—were taped to the wall, forming a circle around Riko. "As you know, being the 'Butei killer', I specialize in bombs."

Seeing me stop, Riko gathered the hem of her skirt in her hands and raised it slightly, bowing to me in feigned politeness.

"Say, Kinji. Want to come over to the heaven on earth known as IU? Bringing one person along wouldn't be a problem. I could take you with me. You know, in IU…" Riko narrowed her eyes. "…you'll find your brother."

I don't believe this girl. She's desecrating the memory of my brother again.

"Don't make me any angrier than I already am. Mark my words, Riko. Mention my brother again and I just might violate Article Nine on impulse. That would result in an undesirable conclusion for both of us, wouldn't you say?"

Butei law, Article Nine, "Under no circumstances shall a Butei kill another person while operating as a Butei." "Ah. We can't have that. I need you to remain a Butei," said Riko winking at me and wrapping both of her arms around her body. "Let Aria know that we'll welcome the two of you anytime, then."

Booooooooom!

Without warning, Riko detonated the blasting charges behind her.

"…!"

A circular hole had opened in the wall and Riko used it to leap outside of the plane. And she did so without a parachute…!

"Ri-…!"

I tried to shout out her name, but I couldn't. The air within the room was rushing towards the window as if it were being sucked out by a giant vacuum cleaner. The alarms inside the plane blared, and oxygen masks fell from the ceiling like an avalanche. All the various objects in the bar were sent flying towards the gaping hole—paper, tablecloths, glasses, wine bottles…me.

"…!"

I grabbed onto a stool that was fixed to the floor, and the plane's automated systems started to scatter about fire extinguishing substances and sheets of silicon from the ceiling. Those adhesive sheets, which were like birdlime, amassed in mid-air and closed off the hole Riko made just like a spider web. Reaching out to a nearby window, I pulled myself up and looked outside. What I saw in the faint moonlight was Riko drifting farther and farther away as she spun in circles like a dancer with the sky as her stage. I watched as Riko unraveled the ribbon on her back, causing her excessively large skirt and blouse to transform into an awkward looking parachute. The last I saw of her was when she waved her hand in my direction and vanished into the clouds with nothing on

but her undergarments.

I see now. She lowered the plane's altitude this far so she could make her escape.

"…?!"

There were two flashes of light that showed up from behind the clouds Riko had just disappeared into, and they were heading this way at a ridiculously fast speed. My hysteria mode-enhanced eyes closed in on the objects.

You…you gotta be kidding me. Missiles?!

Boooooooooom!!

A devastating sound thundered, and ANA flight six hundred experienced the most sever oscillations of its flight. The impact was clearly unlike something caused by a gust of wind or lightning. It was like the plane had been struck twice by a giant hammer.

"…!"

I hung onto the window as if my life depended on it. Then I looked towards the wings of the plane, praying that they would still be there. It had taken one nightmarish beating after another, but ANA flight six hundred managed to be holding up. There were two jet engines situated on each of its wings, and the inner engine of each pair had been destroyed, but the remaining outer engines were intact. The plane was just barely staying airborne as smoke trailed behind it like shed blood. I was still feeling dizzy due to the sudden drop in air pressure, but I had to hurry to the cockpit. ANA flight six hundred might have withstood the missile attack, but it was still continuing its rapid decent.

The captain and co-pilot seemed to have been hit with tranquilizer darts courtesy of Riko, for they both were unconscious.

"…What took you so long?!" Aria, who I presumed entered the cockpit by using the IC chip embedded keys she took off the pilots, turned around and screamed at me while bearing her tooth when I arrived. At her feet lay an odd piece of equipment which resembled the barbette that had been attached to the Segways. It appeared to be the remains of a device Aria dismantled—the one Riko installed for the purpose of controlling the plane remotely via the controller she had hidden in her hair. Aria fit her small body snuggly into the pilot's seat and took hold of the steering wheel-shaped control column.

"Aria, can you pilot an airplane?"

"I could if it were a Cessna. I've never flown a jet plane before."

She pulled back on the control column with so much force and so little hesitation that I had trouble expelling a few doubts in my mind. ANA flight six hundred responded by elevating its nose as if it had suddenly woken up from a slumber.

"I can control the planes altitude and direction, but…"

"Can you land?"

"No."

"…I see."

I could tell that the plane was flying horizontally. Returning my attention to the window, which was streaked with heavy rainfall, I noticed the plane was flying so close to the ocean surface that a chill ran down my spine. It couldn't have been much more than three hundred meters in the air. It was a perilous situation. I sat down in the other chair and upon finding the radio, switched from intercom to speaker.

"…Please respond…thirty-one. I repeat. This is Haneda Control Tower. ANA flight six hundred, respond on emergency communication frequency one twenty-seven six thirty-one. I repeat. One twenty-seven six thirty-one. Please respond."

Their communication came through. I turned on the microphone that was installed on the instrument board.

"…This is flight six hundred. The plane was hijacked moments ago, but we've managed to regain control. The captain and co-pilot are incapacitated. Currently, we two Butei who were passengers on the flight are piloting the plane. My name is Kinji Tohyama. The other is Aria H. Kanzaki."

The voices of the people at Haneda were mixed with both relief and surprise in response to my statement.

Great. For the time being, at least we've established a connection with the control tower.

I then proceeded to make use of the satellite phone I took off the captain's belt a short while ago. This type of phone, which was very similar in appearance to a cell phone, was also used in maritime communications, so it was capable of making a connection to a phone line via satellite no matter where you called from or at what speed you were traveling. As I started making the call, I connected the phone to the speaker using Bluetooth. I was still in hysteria mode. Everything I needed to do came to mind in perfect order.

"Who are you calling?"

Aria's question was answered by the new voice that came from the speaker.

"Hello?"

"Muto, it's me. Sorry for calling from an unfamiliar phone number."

"I-Is this Kinji?! Where are you right now?! Your girlfriend is in trouble!"

"She's not my girlfriend, but if you're referring to Aria, she's right here next to me."

Goki Muto was an excellent student in the Logi division. Keeping relations with the guy seemed to be my inescapable fate, but the time had finally come for it to pay off.

"Wait…What are you doing…?!" Muto said, confused.

"G…gir…girl…"

Having been called my girlfriend, Aria displayed her proneness to

blushing and became a stuttering mess. She looked like she was about to start protesting so I placed my index finger on her lips and put a stop to it.

"…Ngh!"

Aria became redder still, but more importantly, she stiffened up and remained quiet.

"…Muto, I'm surprised you knew about the hijacking. Is it on the news?"

"It's been big news for a while now. A passenger probably used one of the phones inside the plane to report the incident. The guys at Connect looked up the list of passenger names in no time. Aria's name was included so we all gathered here at the classroom."

I gave a brief explanation of our current situation to Haneda Control Tower and Muto. I told them how the plane had been hijacked and that the perpetrator escaped. I also mentioned that we were hit by missiles and two of our engines were destroyed.

"ANA flight six hundred, remain calm. That B737-350 was made using the most state-of-the-art technology. It can fly without any problem using just the remaining two engines. That's a benefit that won't change regardless of how bad weather conditions are."

Aria showed signs of relief at hearing the information Haneda Control Tower provided.

"More importantly, Kinji, you said the two engines that were destroyed were the inner engines, right? Tell me the number on the fuel gauge. There should be a square-shaped screen a little above the center of the EICAS (Engine-indicating and crew-alerting system). You'll see a circular meter with two rows of numbers, each with four digits. Below that, there are three graduations next to the word 'Fuel'. Tell me the number that's in the center, marked 'Total.'"

That was a vehicle geek for you. Muto spoke as if he were looking right at the instrument board.

"It just became five-forty. It seems to be dropping little by little. It's at five thirty-five now."

I heard Muto click his tongue after I told him what he wanted to know.

"Damn it…it's really leaking excessively."

"The fuel's leaking…?! T-Tell me how to stop it!" Aria cried hysterically.

There was a short pause.

"There's no way to stop it. Simply put, the engines of the B737-350 that are closer to the fuselage are also the gates to the fuel system. If they've been destroyed, the leakage can't be stopped no matter what you do.

"H-How much longer will the fuel last?"

"There might be a lot of fuel left, but it's leaking out at a fast pace. I

hate to tell you this, but…around fifteen minutes."

"This state-of-the-art technology is really something." I said in a word of sarcasm to the people at Haneda Control Tower.

"Kinji, I heard this from the guys at Connect, but apparently that plane had just been flying in circles above Sagami Bay. Right now, you're flying above the Uraga Channel. Head back to Haneda. Considering the distance to other airports, that's you're only option."

"That was my intention all along," said Aria.

"…ANA flight six hundred, how are you piloting the plane? Make sure you don't take it off of autopilot."

"The autopilot went off-line a long time ago. I'm piloting the plan right now."

Aria looked at the section of the instrument board where a red light that read 'Autopilot' was flashing, accompanied by a warning tone that beeped at the same tempo. I didn't know the details, but Aria was probably right.

"…that being the case, I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me how to land."

"…it's not the sort of thing an amateur can become capable of doing right on the spot… Currently, we're preparing to engage in emergency communications with the nearby aircrafts in the area. We'll try to find a captain with a long history of flying the same model plane…"

"There's no time," I interjected. "I want you to open communications between us and every other aircraft in the vicinity. Can you do it?"

"W-Well, yes, that's possible, but…what do you plan on doing?"

"I'm going to divide them up and have all of them explain to me at the same time the different procedures required to land this plane. Muto, you help out too."

"At the same time?! Kinji, you're not Prince Shoutoku!"

"I can do it. In my current state, I can do it. Could you be quick about it? We don't much time, after all."

I noticed Aria looking at me with an expression of surprise on her face. She looked like she was about to say something, so I silenced her with a wink of my eye and returned my gaze to the front of the plane. Flying under the clouds, through the raging rainstorm, I could see the lights of Tokyo coming into view beyond the black ocean. We were headed straight for the lights as if we were on a collision course to Tokyo.

Listening to eleven people speak at once, I instantly understood how to land the plane. Now I was able to read all the gauges on the instrument board. We were currently at an altitude of one thousand feet; that was around three hundred meters. It was a dangerous altitude to be flying at no matter how you looked at it, but since we would only remain airborne for ten more minutes, we couldn't afford to waste a single drop of fuel, so I didn't dare to climb even one meter higher. As we approached the airspace above Yokosuka, we heard a deep voice

come from the speaker connected to Haneda.

"ANA flight six hundred, this is the Ministry of Defense, Aviation Administration."

Aria and I exchanged glances.

The Ministry of Defense…?

"You are not granted permission to use Haneda Airport. The airport is currently being blockaded by the Self-Defense Force."

"What the hell are you talking about?!"

The person who yelled was neither Aria nor I. It was Muto.

"Who is this?" demanded the deep voice.

"I'm Goki Muto, a Butei! Flight six hundred is leaking fuel! They can only fly for ten more minutes! There's nowhere for them to make a diverted landing! Haneda is their only option!

"Butei Muto, yelling at me isn't going to get you anywhere. This is an order from the Minister of Defense."

I felt an unsettling presence and looked to the side of us. Aria followed my gaze outside the window and I heard her catch her breath. Right outside of the plane, an F-15J Eagle, the Japan Air Self-Defense Force's fighter jet, was flying right next to us.

"Hey, Ministry of Defense. I can see one of your friends outside the window…"

"…He's there to guide you. Follow him out to sea and head for Chiba. He'll take you to a safe landing zone."

Aria rotated the hand wheel to the right and starting turning the plane towards the ocean. As I disconnected the line to Haneda, I placed my hand on top of Aria's, stopping her.

"…Don't head out to sea, Aria. That guy was lying."

"?"

"The Ministry of Defense doesn't think we can land safely. Once we're over the ocean, we'll be shot down."

"Y-You can't be serious…! It's not just us; there are civilians on this plane as well!"

"If we crash land in Tokyo it'll be a big disaster. They're desperate."

My hand still on top of Aria's, I turned the wheel to the left and had the plane head towards Yokohama.

"K-Kinji?" With her fingers somewhat stiffened, Aria looked up at me anxiously. It was a look that said I was being depended on.

"If that's how they're going to be, then we'll respond respectively and take hostages. Aria, fly over the city."

ANA flight six hundred flew over Yokohama Minatomirai and into the Tokyo metropolitan area. There were seven minutes of fuel remaining.

"So where do you plan on landing, Kinji? There's no other airstrip in this city."

"Muto, how long of an airstrip would we need?"

"For a B737-350 with two engines…I'd say about two thousand four hundred and fifty meters."

"…do you know what the wind speed is over there?

"Wind speed? Reki, what's the wind speed at Academy Island?"

"My sense is that five minutes ago, it was forty-one point zero two meters per second heading south-southeast."

I heard the voice of Reki from Snipe in the background.

"In that case, Muto, how long would the airstrip need to be if we came down against a wind speed of forty-one meters per second?"

"…I guess…two thousand and fifty meters would do it."

"…Just enough," I whispered to myself, and both Muto and Aria went silent for a moment.

"W-Where do you intend to land?" asked Aria. "There's no straightaway like that in Tokyo."

"Remember the way the Mega-Float that Butei High lies on is shaped? It's a rectangle two kilometers from north to south and five hundred meters from west to east. If we go in at a diagonal, we can secure two thousand and sixty-one meters."

"H-Hey…" Muto sounded concerned.

"Don't worry, Muto. We're not gonna come down on Academy Island."

"…?"

"We'll use Empty Island. There *is* another Mega-Float to the north, on the other side of Rainbow Bridge."

"Dude, you're…How do you come up with these outrageous ideas? Is that really you, Kinji?"

"Haha…Aria, who's sitting right next to you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Go ahead and answer."

This is no time to be teasing Aria, hysteria mode Kinji, I reprimanded myself.

But Aria just gave another demonstration of how susceptible she was to blushing. Her indignant eyes began to open wide, and she looked like she was going to make an objection, but it probably dawned on her that I was the leader taking charge at the moment. The proud little princess turned away from me and answered.

"Kinji."

She said it ungraciously with the attitude of a child who surrendered to an adult.

"There you have it, Muto. I *wish* I could be elsewhere though."

The night view of Shibuya and Harajuku passed by directly underneath us. *Everyone in the city must be pretty startled*.

"The Mega-Float…In theory, it's doable…" Muto replied with a sigh.

The hardened expression on Aria's face suddenly lightened up.

"But you know, Kinji," Muto continued. "That place is really just a

floating island. It doesn't even have guidance lights, let alone any guidance systems. Regardless of the type of plane, even in the worst situation, at the very least, you need guidance lights or you can't make a nighttime landing. Not to mention your vision is gonna be horrible due to the heavy rain; plus, there's a windstorm. Add to that the fact that you're going to be landing manually–"

"Well then, Aria, do you wanna give up on landing and commit suicide with me?" I interrupted Muto's lecture and asked Aria.

"I-I refuse to commit suicide with you even if it kills me."

Aria made somewhat of a contradictory statement and stuck her tongue out at me.

"Haha. This is a happy occasion. Our opinions matched for the first time."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm against committing a double suicide myself. I refuse to let you die."

Aria ducked her head down and turned red again, looking as if she was thinking something along the lines of, "Why do have to go and say things like that?!"

"That's the situation, Muto. This plane is going start making preparations to land."

"Wait! Wait, Kinji! Empty Island is wet with rain! You won't be able to stop in time with two thousand and fifty meters!"

"I'll do something about it. Have faith in me."

"D-Do whatever you want! Screw this up and I'm gonna run you over!"

He must have gone berserk because before he hung up, I could hear him yelling at everyone else in the classroom.

Nearly grazing the skyscrapers of Shinjuku, ANA flight six hundred made a wide turn to the right. There were three minutes remaining. Needing to reduce speed in order to land on a short runway, flight six hundred flew over Tokyo Dome and soared past Tokyo Station and a rainy Ginza at an annoyingly relaxed pace.

"Aria, this plane is flying lower than Tokyo Tower. Make sure you don't crash into it.

"Don't take me for an idiot."

Aria extended the landing gears and transferred the main controls to the co-pilot seat where I was.

Okay, Tokyo Bay is coming into view. I should be seeing the Mega-Float any time now…

But my brain, being in hysteria mode, came up with the conclusion right away. We had done our best up to this point, but landing the plane…was impossible. I couldn't see even a trace of Empty Island. Just like Muto had said, past Shiodome, Tokyo Bay was shrouded in darkness. There were no guidance lights or anything, so it fell to reason.

I knew it would be dark, but to think it would be this dark… The way things stood, I had no idea what angle to land at or how high I was flying. Under these circumstances, not even a veteran pilot would be able to avoid a disaster. I had no choice but to change my way of thinking and come up with a method to crash land that would result in the fewest casualties. Aria's sixth sense must have told her that's what was going through my mind.

"Kinji. It's okay. I know you can do it. You have to. If you want to quit being a Butei, dying as a Butei would mean defeat. And you're not the only one. I still haven't saved my mom!!"

As Aria was speaking to me, just like magic…

"I can't afford to die yet! There's no way I'm going to die in a place like this!"

…lights became visible on Empty Island in front of Bay Bridge…!

"Kinji! Are you seeing this, you damned idiot?!

The line connecting us to Muto became active again, and I heard his voice along with the heavy rain splattering on the windshield.

"Muto?!"

"If you die, Shirayu-…I mean, there are people who are gonna be in tears! I stole the biggest motorboat they had at Logi! We all brought Armed's (Equipment Division) Maglites out here without permission, too! You be sure to write everyone's apology letters for them after this is over!"

Following Muto's complaints, a third party and a fourth party, one after another, people's voices came through on the line between Muto and me.

"Kinji!"

"I can see the plane!"

"You're almost there!"

"Hang in there just a little longer!"

Being in hysteria mode, I could tell. These voices. It was them. They were the students Aria and I rescued during the bus-jacking…! They had crossed over to Empty Islands from Academy Island and were making guidance lights for us!

Butei Charter, Article One, "*Believe in your comrades and help one another*." I carefully lowered the plane's altitude and made my way down—down to the island to which they led us…!

Screeeeeeeeeeeech!

ANA flight six hundred went through with its forced landing on the rain beaten Mega-Float. Enduring oscillations that seemed strong enough to make the eyes come out of one's sockets, Aria activated the reverse thrusters.

"Stop, stop, stop, stop, stooooooooop!!"

"Here we gooooo!" I yelled in tune with Aria's high-pitched anime voice.

I quickly maneuvered the steering wheel used for taxiing the plane and made it curve. It would take more than two thousand and fifty meters for the plane to stop on a runway wet with rain. Muto was right about that. But I had a plan. I had come down on the Mega-Float prepared to initiate that plan. It was coming up ahead—the pillar of a wind turbine generator…!

Crash!

I steered the plane so that its wing collided with the pillar and swung around it, sending the plane spinning as it slid. Inside the cockpit, Aria and I were tossed about like clothes in a washing a machine.

…

"Ngh…owww…"

I smell…gardenias. Oh, right. This is Aria's scent.

Suffering from the pain that I felt throughout my entire body, I opened my eyes. Outside the window, I could see Rainbow Bridge. ANA flight six hundred…had come to a stop. Everything was as close a call as it could have been, but somehow, it worked out. But…for some reason, I was unable to move. At that point, I already knew to expect the situation that Aria and I were fated to end up in. Just as I predicted, I was sitting in a reclined co-pilot's seat with Aria lying on top of me. Aria was unconscious and had her legs around my waist, her arms over my shoulders, and her pretty face resting on top of my head.

"Haha…"

I slowly looked down towards her upper body…and there was no problem. Her blouse wasn't lifted up.

Looks like I'll get out of this without being shot at this time.

Or at least, that's what I thought for the next three seconds. While Aria's blouse may have been in order, her skirt was completely turned up.

"…!"

I quickly averted my eyes. Then, without looking and careful not to wake Aria up, I gently fixed her skirt for her.

That should do it.

I managed to survive after nearly being killed for seeing the top half. I sure as hell wasn't going to be marked for assassination again for seeing the bottom half. Can you blame me?

Final Bullet La Bambina dal'ARIA…

Anyways, I slept like a log at the hospital, and when I woke up, it had all been a dream. Such was the conclusion I was hoping for, but that didn't seem to be the case. The evidence was the pain all over my body. Considering there were twelve areas on my body, which consisted of bruises, abrasions, and sprains, I guess it made sense that I was in pain. This was reality—quite different from the way things worked in comics or the movies.

At the moment, I was looking at the night view of Tokyo from the balcony of my quiet apartment. One of the wind turbine generators on Empty Island was bent, and underneath it was a B737-350 waiting to be dismantled.

Aw, man. I went and ruined the scenery I liked so much.

"I never thought I'd see such a beautiful starry sky in Tokyo," said Aria.

"It's that whole 'clear weather after a typhoon's passing' thing."

Aria and I were speaking on the balcony under a sky filled with countless stars. Today was a hell of a day, what with questioning by the police and interviews for television. It had gotten this late before I could finally get back home to this apartment. For some reason, Aria came with me though.

"…My mom's trial date got pushed back," Aria said while gazing out at Empty Island. "This latest incident proved that the charges against her for the 'Butei killings' were false. Her lawyer said the Supreme Court trial would be postponed until further notice."

"I see."

The situation didn't really call for a 'Congratulations', so that was all I replied with. After looking at the B737 with its broken wing, Aria turned towards me.

"Tell me, why…did you get on that plane and come to my aid?"

"Why?" Don't ask me questions that I don't know the answer to myself.

"…well, because I figured that being the idiot you are you wouldn't be able to defeat the 'Butei killer.'"

"I-It wasn't that big of a deal…I could have handled it on my own.

You're the idiot." "Yeah, I guess. I might be an idiot for saving an idiot like you." I put my elbows on top of the balcony wall and let out a fairly deep sigh. Aria blinked those big eyes of hers and after hesitating a bit, spoke up again.

"Sorry. That was a lie."

"What was?"

"The part about being able to handle it on my own."

She said it with a sigh and started talking in a subdued fashion, which was rare for Aria.

"You know, when we were up there in that plane…I figured it out. I understood why I need a partner. There are some things I can't resolve by myself. If you weren't there, I'm sure I would have…"

"…"

"…That's why I came to say goodbye today."

"…Goodbye?"

"I'm going to go and find a partner after all. The truth is…I wish it could be you, but a promise is a promise."

"Promise?"

"Just one case. We promised, didn't we?"

"Oh…yeah."

Now that she mentions it, we did promise that. I return to Assault and pair up with Aria—just once. It only lasts until the Butei killer case is resolved.

"Butei Charter, Article Two, 'Fulfill the contract made with your clients at all costs.' So I won't come after you anymore."

Aria was becoming less and less resolute. She continued to repeatedly make up her mind to say something, only to decide against it again until she finally looked me straight in the eyes once more.

"…Kinji, you make a fine Butei. That's why I respect your will now and…I won't call you a slave anymore. So…if you ever change your mind…um, come see again. If that time should come, then next time, we'll be partners for sure…"

It seemed like Aria still wasn't able to completely give up on the idea, and my response to her offer was a simple apology.

"……Sorry," I said, unable to help but look away from her.

I had no intention of becoming a Butei. There was the issue of my brother as well. And to be honest, I'd had enough of placing myself in dangerous situations like the one we just went through.

"T-That's fine. If that's the way you feel about it. I mean, I am still an 'aria' anyways. Forget what I just said."

With that, Aria turned her back towards me and perhaps due to the cold, headed back inside.

"What a bummer! This month in Tokyo was the pits! In the end, I wasn't able to find a partner, I injured my head, and I was horrible at UFO Catcher!"

Aria spoke as if she just didn't care anymore, and figuring I could at least see her off cheerfully since it would be the last time, I feigned a smile as I went back inside.

"If…there is a next time, I'll show you the trick to winning at UFO Catcher. But you know, you do need a sense for which prizes make good targets."

"What? Are you trying to say I don't have good sense?" retorted Aria, looking up at me with her hands on her hips and bearing her tooth. "Keep insulting me and I'll open a hole in you! Ten of 'em…no, a lot more!" Aria stuck her tongue out at me and laughed. It must have been contagious because I found myself laughing as well. I'm not sure what was so funny exactly, but we just continued to laugh together. I saw Aria to the door and watched over her as she put on her shoes, which she had slovenly thrown down on the floor when she came in.

"Ah, it's already this late. I've gotta hurry."

"Do you have some sort of appointment?"

"Yeah. Someone's coming to pick me up. What with everything that's happened, the London Bureau of Butei said they would have their helicopter in Tokyo to take me back."

The London Bureau of Butei. That's where Aria was operating as a Butei.

"Before my mom was arrested, I worked there pretty extensively. They're nagging me to hurry and come back. It's their way of turning a blind eye to their own incompetence. But, I decided this would be a good opportunity for me to go back for once and make a fresh start."

"Go back…to London?"

"Yeah. I'll be heading to the British Navy's aircraft carrier by helicopter, and from there I'll get on a carrier based jet."

A…navy aircraft carrier? Talk about large scale. That's nobility for you.

"I hope you find someone—a partner, that is."

"I'm sure I will. Thanks to you, I know that 'there's nobody in the world who can be my partner' isn't true."

"I see…Yeah, I guess so. Well, see you around. Hang in there."

"I will. Bye-bye."

Aria opened the door without looking back…and left the apartment. I didn't stop her from going. The door closed after her. *Now this episode is finally over with.…*

….

"…?"

I didn't hear Aria's footsteps. She had left, so the next thing she would have to do is go to the elevator or the stairwell. Finding it a little odd, I looked out the spy hole. What I saw was Aria in front of the door, sobbing.

"Not like this…I don't want things to end like this, Kinji…There's no one… There's no one…like you…anywhere. I'll never…be able to find

anyone…" Aria whispered to herself as she frantically used the back of her hand to wipe away the tears streaming from her eyes.

…Aria. Why…are you crying? You were laughing just a second ago. You were laughing with such a positive attitude. So why? Why are you crying… Aria.

In the end, I wasn't able to bring myself to open the door. I felt that doing so would have made profound changes in my life. I sank down into my sofa and placed my hand on my forehead.

Just pretend you never saw it. You never saw Aria's tears. Then it can all come to an end. That's right, Kinji. Just think back. Being with that girl is nothing but a nuisance. All she does is bring trouble with her. She's like the plague. It's great that she's gone. Come on, Kinji. Open up your desk drawer. Get out your application to transfer out of Butei High. That's right. That's the way it should be. You've been busy recently, so you couldn't turn it in, but why not just take it to the educational affairs department right now and stick it in the mail slot? Then you can attend a normal high school and go to a normal college. Why not become a salary man or something and live the ordinary life you've been planning for yourself?

The more I thought about it, the stronger a presence Aria became in my mind. Aria…Aria. She showed up all of a sudden like a typhoon and threw my life into disarray; then she disappeared, like the wind.

…What was up with Aria exactly? I thought I would be relieved once she was gone…So why am I so depressed? Am I being swayed by the cute little thing's tears? Me? That's ridiculous.

Somehow, the Leopon attached to my cell phone on the desk looked like it was crying.

"Damn it. Kinji…what are you thinking? Stop. Just stop," I said to myself.

I've thought to myself more than once that Aria, fighting courageously, was like a small lion cub. But she was no lion. She was a lost little kitten. She left her home and didn't know where to go. No one would stand by her, and she would wind up covered in blood after battling crows and stray dogs. She had no idea what to do and was crying inside a garbage can that fell into a ditch. Aria was that little kitten.

"Aria…"

I squeezed Leopon in my hand. If Aria were going to save her mother, Kanae, she would have to fight against other foes besides the 'Butei killer'. Aria…She would have to fight, and fight, and keep fighting in this world that was like a giant garbage can.

Are you okay with that?

She continued to call herself an 'aria' to the very end.

Are you okay with that, Aria? You're still wet behind the ears. You're the defective heir of the Olmes family. Are you okay with being an 'aria'?!

"Of course she isn't. You understand, don't you Kinji."

Like Aria, I, too, was a defective heir of the Tohyama family. I couldn't become a hero of justice. But…but…

…If it were just Aria's ally, that was something I might be able to become.

I could just barely smell Aria scent, which still remained in the apartment. It was that overly sweet aroma of gardenias.

"Sweet…really sweet. Kinji, *you're* too damned sweet! Damn it all!"

Talking to myself, I ripped up the application to transfer. I tore it in two, right down the center.

Thirty minutes had passed since Aria left my apartment. No busses would be coming at this hour. My bike was destroyed. That's why being the sweet idiot I was, I ran as fast as I could to the girls' dormitory where Butei High's helipad was located.

I could see a helicopter on top of the roof. That had to be it. The rotor was spinning, and it looked like it was going to take off at any minute. To make the situation worse, of all the times, the elevator was currently not running because it was under inspection. I raced up the emergency stairwell and headed for the roof. I had pretty much run the entire way from the men's dormitory in the southern end to the girls' dormitory in the north. Now I was climbing up a stairway, and my heart was about to burst. This girl really did make me do a lot of running. Sweat dripped off my face and strong winds disrupted my respiration right when I was already short of breath. But I couldn't stop. I absolutely couldn't stop. I didn't like being a Butei. I didn't like Butei High, either. I also didn't like being around girls. And I didn't like being in hysteria mode. None of that had changed. But what I disliked even more was the thought of becoming the kind of lousy jerk that could ignore the tears of that midget, Aria. There were still six months before the time came to submit applications to transfer out of this school. As for my torn up application, I'd fill out another form during these six months. But until that time comes…I'll run for you just a little while longer!

Bam!

I kicked open the door in front of me, and I could see that I was a little too late. The helicopter, creating a thundering sound with its rotor, had just reached a height of ten meters in the air above the roof.

"Aria!!" I yelled.

Ceasing to think, I just continued screaming.

"Aria! Ariaaaaaaa!!" I yelled with lungs that were completely out of breath. I yelled so hard, I thought those lungs were going to burst. I yelled louder than I ever had before in my life.

"Ariaaaaaaa!!"

My hair became disheveled in the gusts of wind sent down upon me by the helicopter's rotor. My shirt and pants were flapping noisily in the wind with seemingly enough force to be ripped off my body. I'm sure Aria couldn't hear my voice over the sound of the helicopter. But I

couldn’t help but scream anyway. Aria! Aria! Aria!

The sliding door of the helicopter opened with an audible sound and a surprising amount of force.

“Kinji, you idiot! What took you so long?!”

Aria had her head sticking out of the door, and then of all the things, she tied a wire to the edge of the helicopter and jumped down surrounded by the strong winds!

“Wai–! You–!”

Though Aria was slowing herself down with the wire, she was descending at a speed that wasn’t much different from free falling. The pilot must have gotten flustered and screwed up in controlling the helicopter because it wobbled in mid-air, sending Aria swinging like a pendulum.

“Wha-? H-Huh?! Huuh?!”

“…H-Hey! Wai–!”

I backpedaled in an attempt to catch Aria, but soon enough my back came up against the chain-link fence. Aria finally went and released herself from the wire, causing her to come flying directly towards me diagonally.

Do you think girls come falling down out of the sky?

In the next instant, all the color drained from my face.

“…!”

The force of Aria's impact sent me reeling back into the chain-link fence, which bent backwards a great deal as a result. The fence was now slanted at an angle and shaped more like a launch ramp, and the two of us slid down it, returning to the roof.

Thank goodness. One false move and we would have fallen right off the roof.

"Y-You seriously–!"

"Aria, what are you doing?!"

My bellowing was followed by that of a Caucasian man in the helicopter. He was probably a government official of the London Bureau of Butei.

"Pbbbbbtt."

Aria was pulling down her lower eyelid with her index finger and sticking her tongue out at the helicopter in the sky while it sent her pigtails fluttering all over the place with the downward air current it was making. I'm not sure if that upset the people on board, but a few officials from the Bureau of Butei used a wire to descend from the helicopter onto the rooftop.

The London Bureau of Butei. They wanted to take Aria back. They want to bring her back to Britain and work her like a horse. They were probably in a panic because Aria had said she would return, but was now jumping ship.

The situation sure looks grim. There's too many of them. At this rate, Aria's going to be taken back to London. I've got to do something…! But in my current state—the Kinji who's not in hysteria mode—there's absolutely nothing I can… No, I have to do something. That's just an excuse for me. Find out what it is you can do even when you're not in hysteria mode!

"Aria."

"What?"

"Do those guys still have wire on them?"

"They should have used it all when they descended from the helicopter just now. There were no spares inside," said Aria placing her hands on her pistols.

"Don't shoot, Aria. They're officials from another country. If they get hurt, it's gonna be a big problem."

"…What are you going to do then?"

I replied by making a desperate dash to the door that led to the stairway. Once there, I used the Beretta I bought anew to fire a couple rounds into the doorknob and destroy it.

Perfect. It bent out of shape quite nicely. It should be impossible to leave this rooftop now.

"W-What's the point of sealing off the exit?!" stormed Aria.

I smiled wryly as I looked back at her. I imagine it must have been a pretty pathetic and unreliable looking face.

"Sorry, Aria. This is the only thing I could come up with in my

current state."

"?"

"You…jumped off of here to save me before, didn't you?"

When the 'Butei killer' took over my bicycle, Aria, you jumped off of the roof of this girls' dormitory to save me. I remember it well.

"Aria, in my current state, this is how I naturally am—a guy who's not capable of doing much of anything…"

"…?"

"But repaying you the favor you did me—I can do that much!"

Aria, come on! You strengthen your resolve! If you intend to make a worthless guy like me your partner, you're gonna have to do reckless stuff like this!

I ran towards the chain-link fence we had just nearly toppled over.

"Kinji?!" said Aria, running after me.

"Aria! You're an 'aria'! It's true! I'm sure you are! But…!"

The chain-link fence was in the shape of a launch ramp, and I used it just like one.

"…I'll at least be your BGM!!"

Screaming those words, I jumped into the sky looking as if I were striding over the full moon, which just reached its peak.

I wonder.

Am I a too much of a Mr. Nice Guy? Why did things come to this, exactly?

The wire in my belt that I attached to the chain-link fence earlier was slowing down my fall. Aria, with her skirt turned up considerably, had jumped down and came grabbing onto me in mid-air. Aria and I came crashing into the vinyl greenhouse that was located next to the girls' dormitory. The vinyl roof became a cushion to stop our fall…or, that's what I had hoped. We plowed right through the roof and fell inside of the greenhouse.

"…O-Ow…"

"K-Kinji, you idiot!"

It certainly was a reckless idea. Our eyes were spinning around like they do in the comic books. Aria staggered to her feet.

"T-That was the worst plan ever! You're in 'idiot Kinji mode', aren't you…?"

That word finally came out of Aria's mouth, and my cheek twitched upon hearing it. Although she didn't know all the details, the number of people who knew about my secret had increased. The searchlight of the helicopter came shining down into the greenhouse from above. We found ourselves being singled out by the circular light as we were right in the center of it. It was just like an act out of an opera.

“Kinji.”

Aria pointed her crimson eyes at me. I looked up at her, still sitting on the ground.

“You have mysterious abilities that are rapidly enhanced when triggered by something.”

“…”

“I’m not sure what that ‘something’ is. And you have no self-control over it.”

“……”

“But you know, I just thought of something. If that’s the case, all I have to do is train you to be able to use those abilities at any given moment! That’s it! The answer was that simple! Don’t you agree?!”

“Wai–…! T-That might be physically possible…but it’s ethically out of the question!”

“A man shouldn’t go back on his word!”

“I never said any words to go back on!”

“Oh, just be quiet! I’m going to make you my partner and become an excellent ‘H’, just like my great-grandfather! I’ve made up my mind!”

“W-What is that ‘H’, already?!”

“You still haven’t figured it out?! Unbelievable! What an idiot! Massive idiot! Guinness World Record level idiot! Gold medal idiot!”

Hey, that’s going a bit too far, isn’t it?

“Oh, forget it! I’ve chosen you, so I’ll just tell you! My name is…” Bearing her tooth, Aria put her hands on her hips with an exaggerated motion as she stuck out her chest, which couldn’t be pushed up or plunged. “Aria Holmes Kanzaki!”

“Ho…lmes…?!”

“That’s right! I’m Sherlock Holmes the Fourth! And I’ve chosen you to be my partner, J. H. Watson! I’m not letting you escape again! If you try to get away…”

Wait, wait. Wait a second!

“…I’ll open a hole in you!!”

Epilogue Go For The NEXT!!!

Sherlock Holmes.

He was Britain's famous detective who had an active career around one hundred years ago—an expert with guns and a master of baritsu. And Riko was France's phantom thief, Lupin the Fourth. The first generation Holmes and Lupin battled together in France, and after the struggle ended in a draw, their grudges were passed down through the family. That's what I read in some document at Inquesta. It turns out that 'Holmes' is pronounced 'Olmes' in French.

So that's what it was. But still… Her favorite food is peach buns. She goes on a rampage with her pistols at the drop of a hat. She swings around Japanese swords. Can a cute little midget like that really be a Holmes?!

My inner turmoil was completely meaningless however, Aria, on the bothersome pretext of discovering the key to switch me in and out of modes, had come back to my apartment. I protested against living together, but she argued that since Riko hadn't been captured, the case of the 'Butei killer' still hadn't been resolved. I told her she was just splitting hairs. Having said that…I did agreed with Aria as far as her opinion that Riko was probably still alive. And I was interested in what she was saying about my brother and that 'IU' she kept bringing up. Those missiles that came out of nowhere and hit the ANA flight six hundred were a mystery as well. This case was far from being closed.

With those thoughts in the corner of my mind, one night, Aria and I were arguing over whether peach buns or eel buns tasted better. The chime of the cell phone in my pocket alerted me to an incoming text message. The signal quality in this apartment wasn't the best, and sometimes it would take some time after a message was sent before my cell phone would chime, or at other times a backlog of messages would come all at once. I received a shock as I looked at the display. There were forty-nine unread text messages and eighteen voice recorded messages. And they were all from Shirayuki. The first one read, "Kin-chan, is it true that you're living with a girl?" It was followed by "I just got back from Mount Osore, and I heard a rumor that a girl named Aria H. Kanzaki had seduced you." "Why aren't you answering?" "I'm coming over!" I watched as Shirayuki's messages gradually evolved into something horrifying over a period of thirty minutes.

“A-Aria, m-m-m-m-m-m-m-make a run for it!”

“W-What are you talking about? Why are you trembling all of a sudden? Y-You’re creeping me out, Kinji…”

“T-T-The ‘armed shrine maiden’ is…ah! Oh no…she’s here…!”

Footsteps that sounded like they belonged to a raging bull in the

middle of a charge were resonating in the hallway of the apartment complex. They were coming closer! A piercing metallic sound rang out, and like a bad joke, the door to the apartment was cut open. Standing there firmly with her feet set apart and suited for battle with a metal-plated headband and a sash that held up the sleeves of her shrine maiden garb was…

"Shirayuki!"

Shirayuki was wheezing as if she had made a mad dash all the way over here, and she wore an angry expression under her squarely cut bangs.

"So…you were here…after all…Aria…H….Kanzaki!" said Shirayuki trying to catch her breath between each word.

"W-Wait! Calm down, Shirayuki!"

"It's not your fault, Kin-chan! You were tricked! I know it!"

I still wasn't sure what triggered it, but every now and then, Shirayuki would turn into a demon-like berserker just like this. And at times like these, for some reason, the people around me—usually girls—wind up taking the brunt of her attacks.

"You thieving hussy! A-A-Atone for the sin of seducing and defiling Kin-chan with your death!!"

Shirayuki lifted her Japanese sword, which gave off a bluish glow, above her head. Not even Aria could help but back away, and she was even forgetting to draw her pistols.

"S-Shirayuki, stop! I haven't been defiled in any way!"

"Kin-chan, step aside! I can't kill her unless you get out the way!"

"K-Kinji! Do something about her! W-What's going on here?!"

"*What's going on?" That's what I want to know!*

To be continued!!!

Afterward

There were many people who helped me with the writing of this book. Firstly, there's Misaka, the chief editor and Sasao, the editor. I'm grateful from the bottom of my heart for how they read my manuscript over and over and gave me valuable comments each time. There's also Kobuichi who drew the illustrations of Aria and everyone else. Thank you so much for drawing them all with more charm than even I had envisioned. When I saw cute little Aria on the cover, I looked up and screamed, "This is it!" I also want to thank Itsuki Yuma, Watanabe Iori, and Morita Kisetsu for thinking up the titles of the goth-lolita games that were in the story. Thanks to Kei Shigema, Akira, Kazushi, Hajime Taguchi, Renichi Nanai, Shinji Hoshi, and Matsutomo for the valuable advice they gave me. Thanks to Takeda Esquire for teaching me the reading of the Chinese character, 'kyouwai' (immensely obscene). Thanks to Mr. A, who taught me about guns. And thanks to my family. It's thanks to all of you that I was really able to enjoy writing this book. I sincerely hope all the readers will share that sense of enjoyment.

May Aria meet as many readers as possible and become a happy girl.

Author's Note

Hi there. My name is Kobuichi and I had the pleasure of drawing the illustrations. I was able to draw many cute characters for this book and had a lot fun! Aria, you're so cute!

I tried my hand at drawing 'peach bun Aria', but 'goth-lolita Aria' might have been good too. I think Aria would look cute in goth-lolita clothes! I'd love to line her up with Shirayuki and Riko in shrine maiden garbs.

August 2008
Chuugaku Akamatsu

Aria the Scarlet Ammo

1

Tokyo Butei High School--- A special school where armed detectives, also known as "Butei", receive education as well as training. Kinji Tohyama, a sophomore, has a unique body that can initiate an ability called "hysteria mode" when it is stimulated a certain way. He tries to keep it a secret but all his dreams of living the life of an Average Joe get shattered when he becomes a victim of a bombing incident and meets Butei High "Assault" department elite, Aria H. Kanzaki.

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